

# AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

ISSUE 1

## Lee Keun Ho

AFC Player of the Year Award for Ulsan Hyundai's golden boy

## AFC ASIAN CUP

Build-up to Australia 2015 kicks off

# ISSUE 1

JANUARY 2013

## PLUS UZBEKISTAN

Central Asian nation celebrates 100th anniversary in style



### Eugene Galekovic

The Adelaide United goalkeeper is back in the international frame after AFC Champions League success



### Mirdjalal Kasimov

Uzbekistan icon eyes both domestic and international glory as a coach following legendary playing career



### Younus Mahmood

Iraq's 2007 AFC Asian Cup winning captain looks to bow out on a high after an illustrious career



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## AFC QUARTERLY

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## Zhang Jilong

AFC Acting President  
FIFA Executive Committee Member

Dear friends,

AFC Quarterly is the confederation's latest effort to reach out to the millions of passionate fans of Asian football and put on splendid display the game's glorious achievements. The biggest endeavour of this magazine, which will also be available in an electronic version, will be to make household names of our players and put the spotlight on our many competitions, which produce countless moments of top-notch football entertainment.

Also being featured comprehensively in these pages are the Member Associations without whose exemplary work back home in their countries Asian football would not be scaling the heights we are doing now.

The timing of the magazine's launch ties in with the completion of yet another great year of achievements in 2012 during which our teams made us all extremely proud by excelling in competitions worldwide.

The Japanese women's team won the silver medal while Korea Republic won the bronze medal at the London Olympics and our women's youth teams continued to do well at FIFA events with Japan finishing third in the FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup while DPR Korea were runners-up in the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup.

In the continental theatre, the thrilling triumph of Uzbekistan in the AFC U-16 Championship in Iran once again proved that traditional Asian powerhouses can no longer take their success for granted, and the AFC U-19 Championship in the UAE underlined this fact when Korea Republic were pushed all the way to penalties before they pocketed their 12th title.

I am confident that we have the players and coaches who will make Asia proud at the FIFA U-17 World Cup in the UAE and the FIFA U-20 World Cup in Turkey this year, and bringing all this action and much more to you will be the AFC Quarterly.

On a final note, I wish everybody involved in producing the AFC Quarterly great success and hope fans will be able to engage more with our favourite game through this great step forward.

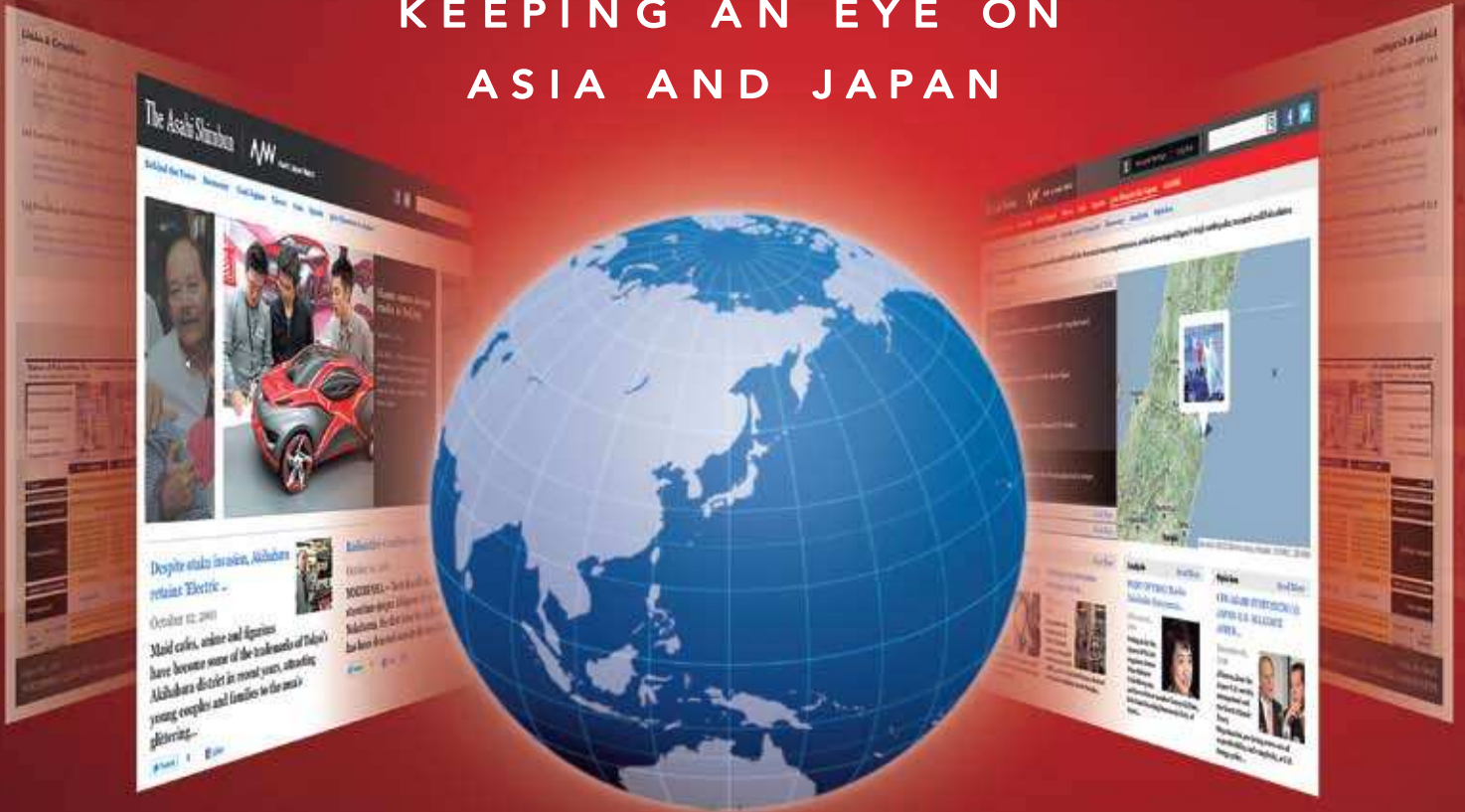
The Future is Asia!

Zhang Jilong  
AFC Acting President



The Asahi Shimbun AJW

## KEEPING AN EYE ON ASIA AND JAPAN



### The Asahi Shimbun AJW (Asia & Japan Watch)

(<http://ajw.asahi.com/>) is the English-language digital version of The Asahi Shimbun, Japan's leading daily newspaper. Founded in 1879, The Asahi Shimbun is the nation's most respected daily Japanese-language newspaper. AJW offers a multifaceted news lineup for Japan and Asia, especially China and the Korean Peninsula.

The site features quality content unique to The Asahi Shimbun, including analysis and investigative articles, opinion pieces by Asahi reporters and outside experts, and other reports aimed at a global readership.

The Asahi Shimbun has a circulation of nearly 8 million. The newspaper prides itself on its investigative reporting and analyses of business and political coverage, as well as insightful stories on Japan's fascinating subculture.

AJW offers unparalleled coverage of the Fukushima nuclear plant accident. The coverage has received positive feedback from many experts around the world.

The site also runs selected articles from The Asahi Shimbun GLOBE.

#### Subscription Plans

To commemorate the site's launch, a special discount rate of \$11.96 (one month) is available. For further inquiries, email Customer Support ([customer-support@asahi.com](mailto:customer-support@asahi.com)).





## **Dato' Alex Soosay**

AFC General Secretary

Dear Asian football fans,

It's time to celebrate Asian football's roaring success through our new communications initiative – the AFC Quarterly.

The objective is to spread the good word about the Asian game around the world by chronicling the achievements of our teams, players and administrators.

In this inaugural edition you will find in-depth interviews with 2012 AFC Player of the Year Lee Keun-Ho of Korea Republic, Chinese star Zheng Zhi and talismanic Iraqi striker Younus Mahmoud, who played an instrumental role in his team's historic AFC Asian Cup triumph in 2007.

Asia has some of the world's greatest clubs and club competitions and we put the spotlight on Saudi powerhouse Al Ittihad of Jeddah, who won the AFC Champions League twice in a row in 2004 and 2005.

The 2015 AFC Asian Cup takes place in Australia and in these pages is provided an update on the preparations.

I hope you will enjoy reading the AFC Quarterly.

Dato' Alex Soosay

AFC General Secretary

# Gallery







.....  
**Ulsan Land  
ACL In Style**  
.....

Captain Kwak Tae-hwi (pictured), Brazilian striker Rafinha and midfielder Kim Seung-yong scored as Korea Republic's Ulsan Hyundai won the AFC Champions League title for the first time with an emphatic 3-0 win over Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli in November's final.

.....



# Gallery







## ..... **Cream Of The Crop** .....

Asia's best were honoured at the AFC Annual Awards in Kuala Lumpur in November, with Korea Republic's Lee Keun-ho being named AFC Player of the Year after the AFC Champions League MVP played a central role in Ulsan's Hyundai's continental success last year.

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# Gallery







.....  
**Paint The  
Town Red**  
.....

After averaging crowds of over 40,000 during their run to the quarter-finals of the 2012 AFC Champions League, Guangzhou Evergrande will be counting on continued support as the Chinese Super League champions return for a second tilt at the continental title this year.

.....



# Livewire Lee Leads The Way

KOREAN STAR CROWNED AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR AT GALA NIGHT IN KUALA LUMPUR AS KAGAWA, MIYAMA AND ROGERINHO ARE ALSO HONOURED

AFC Champions League MVP Lee Keun-ho capped an exceptional year by becoming the first Korean to be named AFC Player of the Year.

Lee (pictured, above) played a key role as Korea Republic's Ulsan Hyundai won the AFC Champions League title for the first time by completing an unbeaten campaign with a ninth consecutive victory over Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli in November's final.

And with Lee also helping Korea Republic remain in the hunt for a place at the 2014 FIFA World Cup, the 27-year-old claimed Asian football's highest individual accolade ahead of Iran's Ali Karimi and China's Zheng Zhi.

"It is great to win this trophy, especially when you have two great nominees

contesting. But all three of us are winners tonight as being here itself is a top honour," said Lee at November's ceremony in Kuala Lumpur. "At the moment I feel over the moon, I am really glad to win this award."

Japan's Shinji Kagawa, meanwhile, was also honoured as the Manchester United midfielder was named the inaugural AFC International Player of Year.

Kagawa had helped Borussia Dortmund win the domestic double in Germany before the former Cerezo Osaka midfielder made a high-profile switch to the English Premier League.

The 23-year-old also helped Japan make an unbeaten start to the final round of qualifiers for the 2014 FIFA World Cup, with the Asian champions currently eight points clear at the top of Group B.

Elsewhere, Aya Miyama (pictured, centre right) was named AFC Women's Player

of the Year for the second successive year helping Japan win a silver medal at the 2012 Olympic Games.

"I believe that this prize would not have been possible without the support of my team-mates. We played like a true team in London," said Miyama. "This togetherness in the team is the sign of success. I dedicate this award to all my team members with whom I played this year."

Brazilian playmaker Rogerinho, meanwhile, was named the inaugural AFC Foreign Player of the Year after helping Kuwait Sports Club win the 2012 AFC Cup.

Rogerinho (pictured, above right) netted his seventh goal of the campaign in the final against Iraq's Arbil to claim the award ahead of compatriots Ricardo Oliveira, who was the top scorer in the 2012 AFC Champions League with 12 goals, and Bruno Correa.





# Japan, Korea Republic Dominate Team, Official Titles

Asia's historic achievements at the 2012 Olympic Games were recognised at the AFC Annual Awards with Japan's silver medal winning women's team and Korea Republic's bronze medal winning men claiming the AFC National Team of the Year prizes.

Japan's women claimed a silver medal after reaching the final against the USA with an unbeaten record, while Korea's men edged out Japan 2-0 in the third place play-off in London.

With Lee Keun-ho claiming the coveted AFC Player of the Year Award, Ulsan Hyundai were named AFC Club of the Year following their successful AFC Champions League campaign with Kim Ho-gon named AFC Coach of the Year Award after

masterminding their unbeaten continental campaign.

The women's award was presented to assistant coach Asako Takemoto, who played a pivotal role in Japan's quarter-final appearance at the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup.

Stars of the future were also recognised with Iraq's Mohanad Abdulraheem Karrar winning the AFC Youth Player of the Year (Men) accolade after being named MVP at the AFC U-19 Championship, while Hanae Shibata was honoured with the women's award after helping Japan finish third at the FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup.

Finally, Japan's Rafael Henmi was named AFC Futsal Player of the Year after the AFC Futsal Championship MVP also helped Nagoya Oceans finish third at the AFC Futsal Club Championship.

**AFC Youth Player of the Year (Men):** Mohanad Abdulraheem (Iraq)

**AFC Youth Player of the Year (Women):** Hanae Shibata (Japan)

**AFC Futsal Player of the Year:** Rafael Henmi (Japan)

**AFC Coach of the Year (Men):** Kim Ho-gon (Korea Republic)

**AFC Coach of the Year (Women):** Asako Takemoto (Japan)

**AFC National Team of the Year (Men):** Korea Republic Olympic

**AFC National Team of the Year (Women):** Japan Olympic

**AFC Referee of the Year (Men):** Yuichi Nishimura (Japan)

**AFC Referee of the Year (Women):** Sachiko Yamagishi (Japan)

**AFC Assistant Referee of the Year (Men):** Abdulkhamidullo Rasulov (Uzbekistan)

**AFC Assistant Referee of the Year (Women):** Kim Kyoung-min (Korea Republic)

**AFC Futsal Team of the Year:** Japan

**AFC Club of the Year:** Ulsan Hyundai

**AFC Fair Play Association of the Year:** Uzbekistan

**AFC Dream Asia Award:** UAE Football Association

**AFC Member Association of the Year:** Iran



# Late President Tan Sri Hamza Honoured By AFC

**F**ormer AFC President Tan Sri Datuk Seri Setia Raja Hamzah Haji Abu Samah was posthumously awarded Asia's most prestigious accolade, The AFC Diamond of Asia Award, in a salute to his contribution to the region.

Tan Sri Hamzah passed away in September aged 88 leaving behind a formidable legacy.

He served as AFC President between 1978-1994, while also serving as a FIFA

Vice-President for eight years from 1982.

Born in the Malaysian state of Pahang, Tan Sri Hamzah was a keen sportsman and enthusiastic administrator and this passion was reflected in his work to improve standards across the AFC.

His tenure as AFC President – which is the longest in the history of the AFC – was marked by strong growth and success as well as improved relations with FIFA.

While holding a position as a high-ranking minister in the Malaysian

government, Tan Sri Hamzah was also an IOC Member and held positions on various committees for over two decades.

He also played a role in Kuala Lumpur's successful bid to host the 1998 Commonwealth Games.

Selected by the AFC Executive Committee and awarded by the AFC President, the AFC Diamond of Asia Award is given annually to an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to the development and promotion of football both on and off the field.





# Guangzhou Date For Returning Reds

**F**ormer champions Urawa Reds from Japan will make their long-awaited return to the AFC Champions League at the end of February with a high-profile trip to China to face domestic double winners Guangzhou Evergrande.

Urawa, who became the first Japanese side to win the AFC Champions League in 2007 (pictured), ensured a place to the Group Stage for the first time since reaching the semi-finals in 2008 by finishing third in the J.League last season.

Guangzhou enjoyed a memorable maiden AFC Champions League appearance last year by reaching the quarter-finals only to lose to two-time winners Al Ittihad in the last eight.

On their way to posting China's best AFC Champions League performance since 2006, Guangzhou helped eliminate 2006 champions Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors from Korea Republic in the Group Stage for the first time.

And the K-League side will get a chance for revenge on Matchday Two in March having lost 5-1 at home to Guangzhou, with Jeonbuk making up the Group F line-up alongside Thailand champions SCG Muangthong United

"The draw will not decide the competition; the ability of the players will decide the result. Last season we reached the quarter-final, but in the new season we aim to win the AFC Champions League," said Guangzhou President Liu Yongzhou.

"This year was the first year we played in the AFC Champions League and this has given us a lot of information and experience we can use in 2013."

Only the top two teams in each group will earn a place in May's Round of 16, which this year will be played over two legs. The quarter-finals will be played on August 21 and September 18 with the semi-finals taking place on September 25 and October 2.

And the final will also be played on a home-and-away basis on October 25/26 and November 8/9.

"2013 is going to be another exciting year and I'm looking forward to it," said AFC General Secretary Dato' Alex Soosay. "We're going to see an exciting AFC Champions League. We have changed the format and we are going to a two-leg Round of 16 and a two-leg final, and it's going to be very exciting next year."

Elsewhere, J.League champions Sanfrecce Hiroshima signal their return to the AFC Champions League for the first time since 2010 with the visit of Uzbekistan's

Bunyodkor.

Having won their first domestic crown with a seven-point margin last year, Sanfrecce will look to better their performance on their sole AFC Champions League appearance three years ago when they missed out on a place in the Round of 16 by just a point.

Former champions Pohang Steelers from Korea Republic, who edged out Sanfrecce in 2010, complete this Group G line-up alongside China's Beijing Guoan with the pair meeting at The Steelyard on Matchday One.

Also on the East side of the draw, K-League champions FC Seoul begin their quest to maintain Korea's strong recent AFC Champions League tradition following Ulsan's Hyundai's 2012 triumph in Group E alongside Japan's

Vegalta Sendai, China's Jiangsu Sainty and the winner of the play-off involving A-League Grand Final winners Brisbane Roar and Thailand's Buriram United.

A-League Premiers Central Coast Mariners, meanwhile, will meet China's Guizhou Renhe, Korea's Suwon Bluewings – now under the control of Asian Club Championship-winning former winger Seo Jung-won – and the Emperor's Cup winners from Japan in Group H.

Guizhou are making their first appearance in the AFC Champions League after reaching the FA Cup Final last season whilst also finishing fourth in the Super League, and begin their campaign with a home tie against the Japanese Emperor's Cup winners.

In the West, beaten 2012 finalists Al Ahli from Saudi Arabia will begin their campaign in Group C at home to Qatar's Al Gharafa, while three-time Iran champions Foolad Sepahan will take on the winner of the play-off between UAE Pro League side Al Nasr and Uzbekistan's Lokomotiv.

Having edged out Al Ahli by just two points to end their six-year wait for the Saudi League title, Al Shabab will also meet Qatari opposition on Matchday One as Stars League runners-up El Jaish travel to Riyadh

for their first ever outing in the AFC Champions League.

Also in Group A, Iranian runners-up Tractorsazi, who are also making their debut in the tournament, welcome UAE President's Cup winners Al Jazira to Tabriz.

Elsewhere, Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal, Iran's Esteghlal, Al Ain from the United Arab Emirates and Qatar's Al Rayyan take their place in Group D, with Qatar champions Lekhwiya, Saudi Arabia's Al Ettifaq, Uzbekistan champions Pakhtakor and the winner of the play-off involving Iran's Sabaye Qom and UAE Pro League side Al Shabab Al Arabi making up Group B.



Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Al Shabab (KSA)	Lekhwiya (QAT)	Foolad Sepahan (IRN)	Al Ain (UAE)	FC Seoul (KOR)	Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN)	Sanfrecce Hiroshima (JPN)	Central Coast Mariners (AUS)
Al Jazira (UAE)	Al Ettifaq (KSA)	Al Gharafa (QAT)	Esteghlal (IRN)	Play-Off Winner	Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (KOR)	Beijing Guoan (CHN)	Emperor's Cup Winners (JPN)
Tractorsazi Tabriz (IRN)	Pakhtakor (UZB)	Al Ahli (KSA)	Al Rayyan (QAT)	Vegalta Sendai (JPN)	SCG Muangthong United (THA)	Pohang Steelers (KOR)	Guizhou Renhe (CHN)
El Jaish (QAT)	Play-Off Winner	Play-Off Winner	Al Hilal (KSA)	Jiangsu Sainty (CHN)	Urawa Reds (JPN)	Bunyodkor (UZB)	Suwon Bluewings (KOR)

# New Era Dawns At FIFA Club World Cup

The meeting between J.League champions Sanfrecce Hiroshima and New Zealand's Auckland City not only marked the start of the 2012 FIFA Club World Cup in Japan, but will also go down as a milestone in football history with goal-line technology available for the first time during a match on Asian soil.

Having been approved by the International Football Association Board (IFAB), two systems were in use.

The magnetic-field-based system GoalRef was installed at the International Stadium in Yokohama, while the matches played at Toyota Stadium during the tournament were equipped with the camera-based Hawk-Eye system.

The GoalRef system creates the radio equivalent of a

light curtain and as soon as the ball, which is fitted with a compact electronic device, fully crosses the line an alert is transmitted to the match officials via a radio signal within one second, with a message displayed on their watches and via vibration.

The Hawk-Eye system uses six-to-eight high-speed cameras set up at different angles at each end to calculate the exact position of the ball.

The data from the cameras is then transferred to video software and from this data, the system generates a graphic image of the ball's trajectory and the match officials are informed whether or not a goal has been scored within one second.

Despite the presence of the technology, the final decision will still rest with the referee.

## Champions Kuwait Set Sights On Third AFC Cup Title

Defending champions Kuwait Sports Club will begin the defence of their AFC Cup title in Group A alongside Lebanon's Safa, Bahrain's Riffa and Tajikistan's Regar-Tadaz following December's Group Stage draw in Kuala Lumpur.

Kuwait SC won the AFC Cup title for a

second time in November after the 2009 champions, who also lost the 2011 final to Uzbekistan's Nasaf, recorded a 4-0 win over Iraq's Arbil.

Arbil also earned a return to the AFC Cup after winning the Iraq League title and begin their 2013 campaign in Group B alongside Lebanon's Ansar, Oman's Fanja and the winner of the play-off involving Syria's Al Wahda and Yemen's Ahli Taiz SC.

Two-time champions

Al Faisaly from Jordan, who won the title in 2005 and 2006, take their place in Group C alongside Iraq's Duhok, Yemen's Sha'ab IBB SC and Dhofar from Oman.

Also in the West, Kuwait's Al Qadsia, Jordan's Al Ramtha, Tajikistan's FC Ravshan and Syria's Al Shorta



make-up Group D with the region seeking to win the AFC Cup title for a ninth time in 10 editions this year, with only Nasaf's 2011 triumph denying a clean sweep since the tournament was introduced in 2004.

With the East seeking to build on the 2012 semi-final appearance by Thailand's Chonburi, Hong Kong champions Kitchee headline Group E alongside

Singapore Armed Forces, Indonesia's Semen Padang and India's Churchill Brothers.

Following Myanmar's debut in the competition last year, Yangon United will face Hong Kong's Sunray Cave JC Sun Hei, New Radiant SC from the Maldives and Indonesia's Persibo in Group F.

In Group G, Myanmar's Ayeyawady United are joined by Malaysian double winners Kelantan, who reached the quarter-finals

in 2012, Vietnam's SHB Da Nang and Maziya Sports & Recreation from the Maldives.

Singapore's Tampines Rovers, Malaysia's Selangor, India's Kingfisher East Bengal, meanwhile, take their place in Group H.



Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Safa (LIB)	Arbil (IRQ)	Al Faisaly (JOR)	Al Qadsia (KUW)	Kitchee (HKG)	Yangon United (MYA)	Kelantan (MAS)	Tampines Rovers (SIN)
Kuwait SC (KUW)	Ansar (LIB)	Duhok (IRQ)	Al Ramtha (JOR)	Singapore Armed Forces (SIN)	Sunray Cave JC Sun Hei (HKG)	Ayeyawady United (MYA)	Selangor (MAS)
Riffa (BHR)	Fanja (OMA)	Sha'ab IBB SC (YEM)	FC Ravshan (TJK)	Semen Padang (IDN)	New Radiant SC (MDV)	SHB Da Nang (VIE)	Kingfisher East Bengal (IND)
Regar-Tadaz (TJK)	Play-Off Winner	Dhofar (OMA)	Al Shorta (SYR)	Churchill Brothers (IND)	Persibo (IDN)	Maziya Sports & Recreation (MDV)	Sai Gon Xuan Thanh (VIE)





Group A	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
Uzbekistan	5	2	2	1	5	4	1	8
Korea Republic	4	2	1	1	9	4	+5	7
I.R.Iran	5	2	1	2	2	2	0	7
Qatar	5	2	1	2	2	5	-2	7
Lebanon	5	1	1	3	2	6	-4	4

Group B	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
Japan	5	4	1	0	13	2	+11	13
Australia	4	1	2	1	4	4	0	5
Iraq	5	1	2	2	4	5	-1	5
Oman	5	1	2	2	4	7	-3	5
Jordan	5	1	1	3	4	11	-7	4

# Japan Close In On World Cup Berth

Asian champions Japan can become the first nation to qualify for the FIFA World Cup in Brazil next year – and secure a fifth straight appearance at the finals in the process – with victory over Jordan in March.

Alberto Zaccheroni's unbeaten side moved eight points clear at the top of Group B with a dramatic 2-1 win over Oman in November and the four-time continental champions could join the tournament hosts in December's draw with a win against Adnan Hamed's side in Amman.

"We achieved what is important in the game especially because we took advantage of two of the most important chances," said Japan coach Zaccheroni after seeing his team defeat Oman 2-1 in Muscat in November thanks to a late goal from Shinji Okazaki. "This win has brought us closer to Brazil."

A fifth victory in six games in Amman would see Japan secure one of the two automatic qualification places for Brazil with two games to spare regardless of the result in Australia as the Socceroos entertain Oman, although

Jordan are in need of returning to winning ways after losing 1-0 to Iraq in November.

Iraq striker Ahmed Hammadi netted with four minutes remaining at Al Arabi Stadium before goalkeeper Noor Sabri produced a superb double save to deny Jordan substitute Hamza Al Dardour with less than a minute remaining as Iraq joined the trio tied for second place after recording their much-needed first win of the final round of qualifiers.

Having posted a dramatic 2-1 comeback win over Iraq in October, a second win of the campaign for Australia against Oman would hand Holger Osieck's side a major boost in their bid to secure a third consecutive FIFA World Cup appearance having made a slow start to final round.

In Group A, Uzbekistan will look to consolidate their position at the top of the table when the AFC Asian Cup semi-finalists entertain Lebanon in March having moved a point clear after stunning Iran in Tehran to record a second consecutive win of the final round in November.

Having finally kick-started their campaign with a 1-0 win over Qatar in October thanks

to Sanjar Tursunov's early strike in Doha, Ulugbek Bakaev struck with 19 minutes remaining to lift Mirdjalal Kasimov's side a point clear of Korea Republic, Iran and Qatar.

"It was a fantastic match, a hard-fought battle in which both sides strived to grab the win," said Kasimov, who returned to the national team ranks after Uzbekistan lost 1-0 at home to Iran at the start of the final round of qualifiers.

"The victory over Iran is very pleasurable particularly as it happened at the Azadi Stadium."

Victory over Iran in September finally kickstarted Lebanon's campaign, although after losing 1-0 to Qatar in November, Theo Bucker's side now find themselves three points adrift at the foot of the table.

Sebastian Soria's fine individual effort sealed all three points for Qatar, who travel to Korea in March looking to gain revenge from suffering a 4-1 defeat in Doha at the start of the final round.

Despite losing their lead at the top of Group A following the defeat in Tehran, Korea still have a game in hand with three of their remaining four games at home.

# THE GOLDEN BOY

KOREA REPUBLIC'S LEE KEUN-HO BARELY HAD A FOOT – OR HAIR – OUT OF PLACE LAST YEAR, WITH THE BLEACHED BLONDE FORWARD CAPPING A STANDOUT SEASON FOR BOTH CLUB AND COUNTRY BY BECOMING THE FIRST KOREAN TO BE NAMED AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR.

By: Michael Church • Photos: World Sport Group and AFC



Lee Keun-ho's shocking blonde locks were always designed to attract attention: as if the mercurial midfielder's trickery and talent wasn't enough, the straw-coloured mop buzzing throughout the AFC Champions League in 2012 certainly caught the eye.

After a year in which Lee – in his first back playing in the K-League following three seasons in Japan – was the creative

force behind Ulsan Hyundai's well deserved win in the continental club championship, there was only ever likely to be one winner of the AFC Player of the Year Award.

His performances, particularly in the knockout rounds, set the competition alight and it was thanks to his pace and creativity that Ulsan became the latest club from Korea Republic to see themselves crowned AFC Champions League winners.







And yet, when the 27-year-old turned up in Kuala Lumpur ahead of the award ceremony at the Mandarin Oriental, he did so in an unassuming, almost modest manner.

Gone was the eye-catching hair colouring and in its place a more sensible, more sober styling that suggested an understated approach few of the players from throughout Asia who have faced Lee would recognise from a man who has left countless defenders in his wake.

But there could be no mistaking the beaming smile that spread across Lee's face as he moved forward to receive the AFC Player of the Year trophy from Acting AFC President Zhang Jilong; it was the same grin that greeted Ulsan's AFC Champions League win over Al Ahli from Saudi Arabia and Lee's subsequent crowning as that tournament's Most Valuable Player.

"The AFC Champions League final is the biggest event in Asian football and I was really happy that we won it," said Lee prior to his crowning as Asia's leading player for 2012.

"Our target was to win the K-League title and the second goal was to win the AFC Champions League. We didn't get the first target but we did get the second and we're so happy now, but we're not satisfied. There are other goals for us to aim for and we want to do well at the FIFA Club World Cup."

A disappointing performance against Mexican side Monterrey in the Japanese city of Toyota

ended Ulsan's hopes of continuing their fairytale beyond the quarter-finals of the FIFA Club World Cup, and it was perhaps fitting that Lee's time with the club should end on Japanese soil.

Having started his career with in the reserves of his hometown club Incheon United – where he was named the Best Player in 2006 – Lee eventually went on to score 32 goals in 88 league appearances in Japan having first established himself as a fans' favourite with Daegu FC.

"JAPANESE AND KOREAN FOOTBALL IS SIMILAR TO EACH OTHER IN MANY WAYS BUT THEY ARE ALSO DIFFERENT. I LEARNED A LOT FROM JAPANESE FOOTBALL. 'THE FOOTBALL THERE IS MORE DETAILED WITH MORE PASSING AND MORE ORGANISED. THEY PUT A GREATER PRIORITY ON HOW THEY MAKE THE GAME RATHER THAN THE RESULT. IT'S SOMETHING DIFFERENT FROM KOREAN FOOTBALL.'"

It was his form at Daegu – where he developed under the watchful gaze of coach Byun Byung-joo – that convinced first Jubilo Iwata and then Gamba Osaka to sign him during his three-year J.League stint.

"When I played in the J.League, we did well and had some great results but one of the reasons I wanted to come back to Korea was because I always said I would go back to Korea while I was still at my best. I had achieved my goal in Japan," says Lee.

"And also I have to do my military service. Every Korean man has to do two years of military service, so I had to go back.

"Japanese and Korean football is similar to each other in many ways but they are also different. I learned a lot from Japanese football.

"The football there is more detailed with more passing and more organised. They put a greater priority on how they make the game rather than the result. It's something different from Korean football.

"But it's not only the football but I've been part of a good system there, everything was well organised and the fans were great.

"In the J.League, the teams put more priority on the process of making the goals but sometimes they take too long, too many passes. But the K-League is powerful, speedy and quick and more effective. There's more pressure to break down the other team."





Lee wasn't the only former J.League star to feature in the Ulsan side that prepared for the 2012 season. Captain Kwak Tae-hwi had previously been on the books of Kyoto Sanga while Lee Ho spent time at Omiya Ardija.

Kim Seung-yong, meanwhile, had been on Gamba Osaka's books at the same time as Lee, while striker Rafinha – who joined midway through the 2012 campaign – had also been with the pair during their time at Expo '70 Stadium.

The link to the 2008 AFC Champions League winners was strong and Lee credits former Gamba coach Akira Nishino with making his stay in Japan's second city a fruitful one.

"Personally, I liked playing under Nishino very much," he says. "He's a great coach. I had a bad start at the beginning but it was Nishino who extracted the good points, my advantages and strengths from me despite the bad times.

"He gave me a lot of support and I have to thank him. Away from the pitch he's very friendly but when you're in the game he's quite cold blooded and tough."

However, it was Lee's move to Ulsan from Osaka alongside Kim Seung-yong that laid the foundations for what turned out to be a monumental season for Ulsan Hyundai.

"Compared to last year, we made some changes to the squad, some players left and some came in and after these changes we

*Above In action for both Ulsan Hyundai and Korea Republic during a memorable 2012.*

*Far Right Celebrating Ulsan Hyundai's AFC Champions League success with team-mates Lee Ho, Kwak Tae-hwi and Kim Shin-wook.*

**"THE PLAYERS GOT USED TO THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE AS WE WENT THROUGH THE COMPETITION AND, GRADUALLY, THINGS IMPROVED AND WE MANAGED TO GET THIS GREAT RESULT IN THE END."**

tried to organise the club as well as possible," says Lee of the team building process that took place ahead of the 2012 campaign under coach Kim Ho-gon.

"The players got used to the AFC Champions League as we went through the competition and, gradually, things improved and we managed to get this great result in the end."

What made Ulsan's win all the more remarkable was that it was achieved on the backdrop of a significant amount of upheaval within the K-League.

The league's restructuring ensured Korean clubs would have to play 44 league games in

the season – the most ever in K-League history – while also honouring commitments in two domestic cup competitions plus any additional requirements in continental tournaments.

It could easily have served as a distraction – or excuse – for those who fell short in the AFC Champions League, but Lee and his Ulsan colleagues pulled together to ensure the continental title returned to Korea for the third time in four seasons.

"The secret behind our success was the teamwork and also the passion of every single player and official within the team," says Lee.

"Other teams will use the change in the format and the tough schedule as an excuse but I don't want to take advantage of this excuse. We have overcome this obstacle and the change to the format.

"Until the middle of the K-League we did well but after that we slipped a bit so we focused on the AFC Champions League and we obviously did well."

While 2012 was a year of great success for Lee, the next two years will present some very different challenges.

As Korea Republic set their sights on an eighth straight appearance at the FIFA World Cup finals, Lee will be seeking to juggle his national team commitments with his compulsory military service, which starts in January.









*Left* In action against FC Tokyo in the Group Stage of the 2012 AFC Champions League.

*Above* AFC Champions League 2012 MVP.

*Top Right & Bottom Right* Lee Keun-ho scored four goals during the 2012 AFC Champions League.

**"AS A PLAYER, OF COURSE THE TIMING ISN'T GREAT TO BE GOING OFF TO DO MILITARY SERVICE, BUT SINCE I'M A KOREAN MAN AND WE HAVE TO DO MILITARY SERVICE LIKE EVERYONE ELSE DOES THEN I HAVE TO DO MY DUTY LIKE EVERY OTHER MAN IN KOREA."**

"Previously the gap between the top teams and the lower teams was huge but it's getting narrower and narrower and that's because federations in Middle East, in Iran and Uzbekistan have invested more time and money in developing the game and there is more pressure, too, from their fans to succeed," he says of the challenge he and his national team mates face in their attempt to qualify for Brazil.

"It used to be that we would go and play overseas and we would almost always win but

now we're drawing games and even losing against these teams. We are all improving together and the gap is getting smaller and smaller."

Lee will attempt to stay sharp throughout his stint in the army by playing in the K-League's second division with Sangju Sangmu Phoenix and, while he admits the situation is far from ideal, it is a duty he has to undertake.

"As a player, of course the timing isn't great to be going off to do military service, but since I'm a Korean man and we have to do military service like everyone else does then I have to do my duty like every other man in Korea," he says. "I don't want to give up my nationality. Even if I got to the military club, I will still play football because they are in the K-League and after my military service is done I'll assess my performance but it won't be a problem."

"The reality is that this club is playing in the second division in the K-League but we have an aim that we want to achieve and we want to do better so that we can get promoted to the first division so there shouldn't be any difference in the performance. It will be tight and competitive and there shouldn't be any difference."

And as Lee has shown throughout 2012, he can be the man to lead both club and country to further success.



**Lee Keun-ho**

**Nationality:** Korea Republic

**DOB:** 11/04/1985

**Position:** Winger

**Current club:**  
Sangju Sangmu Phoenix  
(Korea Republic)

**Previous clubs:**  
Incheon United, Daejeon FC (both Korea Republic), Jubilo Iwata, Gamba Osaka (both Japan), Ulsan Hyundai (Korea Republic)

# THE NEXT LEVEL

BEING DOMESTIC DOUBLE WINNERS AND CONTINENTAL QUARTER-FINALISTS MAKES PLEASANT READING FOR CHINESE SUPER LEAGUE SIDE GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE IN 2012, BUT WHAT DOES CAPTAIN ZHENG ZHI SEE IN THE FUTURE FOR MARCELLO LIPPI'S AMBITIOUS SIDE?

Guangzhou Evergrande could hardly have hoped for a more eye-catching introduction to their debut season in the 2012 AFC Champions League: a 5-1 over 2011 finalists Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors signalled the intent of the newly crowned Chinese Super League champions to shake up the Asian club football scene.

Elimination by Al Ittihad in the quarter-finals came after a run by the Marcello Lippi-coached side that saw Guangzhou emerge from a group that featured Jeonbuk, J.League champions Kashiwa Reysol and Thai league winners Buriram United before beating FC Tokyo from Japan in the Round of 16.

But while their exit from the competition at the hands of Al Ittihad – a late goal by Fahad Mosaed Al Muwallad at the Tianhe Stadium saw the two-time champions advance – ended their involvement in 2012, club captain Zheng Zhi and the rest of the team are confident of going further in 2013.

"We accomplished the goals we established at the beginning of this year because the main focus for us was the AFC Champions League since it is the first year that Guangzhou Evergrande had played in the competition," says Zheng, who returned to China in 2010 to join Guangzhou following spells with Charlton Athletic and Celtic.

"With the club winning the Chinese Super League title, doing the double and reaching the last eight of the AFC Champions League, it's been a very good year for Guangzhou. It's a pity we couldn't go further in the AFC Champions League but the experience gained will be valuable for next year."

Guangzhou made up for the continental

disappointment by retaining the Chinese Super League title having only returned to the top-flight the previous season before beating fellow 2013 AFC Champions League participants Guizhou Renhe in the FA Cup final.

And with veteran Italian coach Lippi, who won UEFA Champions League with Juventus in 1996, now firmly into his stride with the southern Chinese side having taken over less than two weeks before the last 16 meeting with FC Tokyo, Zheng is looking forward to continued and potentially greater success.

"Lippi was very disappointed that we didn't make it as far as the semi-finals but next year we will prepare according to the AFC Champions League schedule and we will give the competition more priority," adds the 32-year-old.

"After staying in Guangzhou for three years, I am confident that we have the squad to do well. And because we have the support from the Evergrande Group, I'm sure we can do even better next year.

"What we experienced in the AFC Champions League was totally different from what we had faced in the domestic league, including the ability of the opposing teams and the level of the players.

"Also, we had to travel all the way to West Asia with the objective factors such as climate and referees which we had to take into consideration and need to gain experience from.

"It is the first year for the club to play in both the AFC Champions League and the domestic league in parallel and what we have learned will prepare the team better for next year."

Despite the short time frame, the impact of World Cup winning coach

Lippi – who also won the league title in Italy on five occasions with Juventus – was clearly evident against FC Tokyo while Guangzhou will have learnt their lessons – albeit harsh ones – in the defeat by Al Ittihad.

"It was a surprise that he would coach in China or at our club. He was a coach we would only see on TV in top-level UEFA and FIFA competitions," says Zheng of Lippi.

"It is really good for the team and players because we can learn a lot from him and his way of coaching. It is a rare chance that should be treasured.

"Even though he has won many big tournaments, his thirst to win is very strong. He never gives up when there is a chance to win a title."

Money has been no object for Guangzhou but, despite the huge sums spent by the club, Zheng believes there was no guarantee success would follow, and especially not in the short time frame in which it has occurred.

"It's been a bit of a surprise because from the concept, most of the people thought that even if you have invested a lot of money and purchased lots of good players, it does not definitely lead to good results," he says.

"We were a bit worried at the beginning with so many new players and by how long it would take to get settled and get good results, but everyone has been surprised."

Guangzhou will no longer be able to count on that surprise factor next season, while Lippi's side will be wary of a backlash from Jeonbuk with the pair drawn alongside Thailand's SCG Muangthong United and Japan's Urawa Reds in Group F after the K-League side were eliminated in the Group Stage of the AFC Champions League for the first time last year by the Chinese side.







# LONDON CALLING!

IN A STELLAR PLAYING CAREER, HONG MYUNG-BO LED KOREA REPUBLIC TO THE SEMI-FINALS OF THE FIFA WORLD CUP ON HOME SOIL IN 2002. BUT IT WAS AS A COACH DURING THE SUMMER OF 2012 THAT HE ACHIEVED WHAT HE BELIEVES WAS THE FINEST MOMENT IN HIS CAREER.

Few players who graduate to a life in the dugout have the opportunity to favourably compare and contrast their fortunes on either side of the touchline. For many, their achievements on the field will outstrip those they managed after hanging up their boots and making a move into coaching. Going from receiving instructions to handing them out is a subtle yet demanding change in skill-set.

But for Korea Republic legend Hong Myung-bo, the transformation from player to coach has seen the former Pohang Steelers, Bellmare Hiratsuka, Kashiwa Reysol and Los Angeles Galaxy defender surpass even his own achievements.

Hong masterminded his country's bronze medal-winning performance at the Olympic Games in London in the summer of 2012, the first time a men's team from Asia had won a medal at the Olympiad since Japan's success in Mexico City in 1968.

It was, therefore, fitting that it should be against Japan – a country where Hong spent much of his playing career – that the Koreans should capture third place, capping Asia's finest ever Olympic Games.

"We had a very difficult group because Mexico were a few strong team, they were the winners of the Central American qualifying tournament, and also we had Gabon, who were the champions of Africa, so it was very difficult," says Hong of the opening phase of the competition, which also saw the Koreans drawn against Switzerland.

Victory over the Swiss plus draws with Gabon and the Mexicans – who would

go on to beat Brazil to take the gold medal – took Hong and his team into a quarter-final meeting with hosts Great Britain, who the Koreans defeated in a penalty shootout following a 1-1 draw.

That set up a semi-final with Brazil, who defeated Hong's team 3-0 before a 2-0 win over Japan in the third place play-off secured the bronze medal for the Koreans, the country's best ever football performance at an Olympics.

"The most important thing was how we were able to prepare for the Olympics," says Hong. "That was the key thing for us. We prepared very well and then our players also concentrated well and did their own preparations, too, as well as with the team and that's how we did so well."

The other reason to their success, stresses Hong, was the experience gained by playing at varying youth levels as well as for the national side at events such as the AFC Asian Cup in Qatar in 2011 or for professional clubs outside Korea.

"The young players had some good experience at under 20 level before playing at under 23 level as well as for the national team and that gave our team a lot of power," says Hong, who was in charge when Korea featured at the FIFA U-20 World Cup in Egypt, when his team reached the quarter-finals.

"And we had some players who were playing in Europe or in Japan, so our team had a lot of experience, more experience than many other countries. That was good for us, that was to our advantage."

"We started in 2009 at the under 20s and we were always challenging the

players in every way. Korean players have a lot of respect for their coaches but I don't want that. If a player has an opinion, I want them to say something. It's a different approach compared to other coaches in Korea."

"It's a little bit different because some players have experience playing in other countries. They learn something, they have learned a different football culture and that's very important for them."

As a player, Hong established himself as one of the icons of Korean football. His ability to read the game saw him heralded as the finest defenders of his generation while it was Hong who scored the decisive penalty in the shootout against Spain in the quarter-finals of the 2002 FIFA World Cup to take his side into the last four.

But for the man who played 136 times for Korea – the most in his country's history – all of that pales when compared to overseeing his team's performance in the United Kingdom.

"The high point for me so far was the Olympics," he says. "We worked together in 2002 but when you are a head coach your life is very lonely."

"I always told my players that no one is better than the team. That is my philosophy and our team spirit and we were always focused on the team. This was the best, for me."

With an unimpeachable pedigree as a player and a burgeoning reputation as a coach, Hong has yet to decide on the next step in his career.

"I've not decided yet," he says. "I need more rest because I used all my energy working with this team. I need more time to relax."







# BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

FOOTBALL IN UZBEKISTAN CELEBRATED ITS CENTENARY YEAR IN FITTING FASHION AS THE COUNTRY LIFTED THE AFC U-16 CHAMPIONSHIP TITLE IN OCTOBER, A WIN THAT SIGNPOSTS A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR THE CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLIC.

By: Andrew Mullen

Photos: World Sport Group/Courtesy of the Uzbekistan Football Federation, Anvar Ilyasov and Pakhtakor Football Club

From humble beginnings, football in Uzbekistan celebrated its 100th anniversary on September 28, 2012 with a lavish ceremony at the new 35,000-seater Bunyodkor Stadium.

But the glitz and glamour on show at the \$250 million facility was a long way removed from the days – back in 1912 – when football first arrived in Uzbekistan, in an era when the concept of international competition had yet to take hold in Asia.

Given the achievements of domestic heavyweights Bunyodkor and Pakhtakor, the national side's run to the semi-finals of the 2011 AFC Asian Cup and Nasaf's win in the AFC Cup later the same season, the Central Asian nation has enjoyed considerable success in recent years.

But perhaps the most encouraging was last year's victory in the AFC U-16 Championship following key grassroots

investment by the Uzbekistan Football Federation which had previously led to a final appearance at the 2008 U-19 Championship and a strong showing from the U-23 side during the qualifiers for the 2012 Olympic Games.

That success following a century of continued progress paints a positive picture for the future of football in Uzbekistan, which began a year before the Philippines entertained China in Asia's first ever international fixture.

With the events in Manila in February 1913 marking a significant milestone for football in Asia, the game took its first steps in pre-Soviet Union Uzbekistan with the establishment of the first club, Muskomanda, in the Eastern city of Kokand in the Fergana Valley.

The name Muskomanda comprises of two parts with the first Mus, referring to their Muslim religious beliefs, while Komanda is a Russian word used in Uzbekistan which means team.

The three Muhiddinov brothers and their father-in-law formed the main









*Above & Right*  
Muskomanda were founded in 1912 by three Muhiddinov brothers and their father-in-law.

*Left* Pakhtakor reached the 1968 Soviet Cup final, losing 1-0 to Torpedo Moscow.

*Below* Igor Shkvyrin was the top scorer as Uzbekistan won the gold medal at the 1994 Asian Games.

management group of the club after being inspired by watching through the fence as Russian soldiers played football inside a military base.

After eventually collecting enough money to buy a ball from the soldiers, the new team still faced opposition on religious grounds, although the group overcame the issue by deploying lookouts as they played in a concealed area close to a nearby mosque.

Despite the objections and reservations within the conservative society, football in the major cities in the Fergana Valley – Fergana, Namangan, Andijan and Margilan – soon began to flourish before spreading further afield to Samarkand, Tashkent, Bukhara and Kogon.

## Muskomanda

Uzbekistan's first club was founded in 1912

Muskomanda eventually played their first match in 1912 in Khujand, which is now in Tajikistan, and lost 2-1 to the local side.

Three players from Muskomanda then represented Uzbekistan, with the side made up of multiple nationalities and only three native Uzbek players from the Kokand-

based club, at the first sports festival of the Soviet Republic in Moscow in 1928 with Uzbekistan eventually finishing a commendable fifth.

This led to the rise of Uzbekistan football and soon after Musakhodjaev was the first Uzbek player to be called up to join the USSR national team, although he did not play.

At another sports festival played in Tashkent in 1934 comprising of teams from Central Asia and Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan were granted special permission to field two teams, with Muskomanda taking their place alongside the national team to gain experience.

Uzbekistan and Muskomanda eventually won all their games, but as Muskomanda were only playing courtesy of a special invitation, Uzbekistan beat Turkmenistan 3-1 in the final.

## 1946

Uzbekistan Football Federation founded

With the game on the rise, the Uzbekistan Football Federation was officially founded in 1946, although the



foundations for this had been laid in the 1930s through the sports ministry.

Following the end of World War II in 1945, a special championship for troops was organised in 1948 and Uzbekistan – represented by Ado Tashkent – won the tournament in the Ukraine.

After the tournament, Boris Kovesniaev joined Russian military team CDKA Moscow – now CSKA Moscow – and went on to win the Soviet League title in 1950.

A new era in Uzbekistan football then arrived in 1956 with the establishment of Pakhtakor and the building of the 56,000





*Below* Pakhtakor Stadium, pictured here in 1972, was built in 1956 with a capacity of 56,000.



*Above* Named Uzbekistan's player of the 20th century, Gennadiy Krasnitskiy spent his entire 13 year career with Pakhtakor and scored 148 goals in 331 games.

capacity Pakhtakor Stadium.

Pakhtakor played their first match in April with a 44th minute penalty from Laziz Maksudov at Spartak Stadium securing a 1-0 win over Perm before playing their first match at their new home on August 20 in front of a 35,000 crowd.

## 212

Pakhtakor won 212 games in 22 seasons in the Soviet League

Pakhtakor eventually joined the Soviet League in 1960 and, despite losing their first

game 1-0 to at home to Torpedo Moscow, the Cotton Growers took just three years to adapt to life in the top flight and in 1962 finished sixth.

Goalkeeper Yuriy Pshenichnikov, Greek-Uzbek Gennadiy Krasnitskiy and Berador Abduraimov were all recognised for their contributions to Pakhtakor's success and would all go onto represent the USSR.

The likes of Mihail An, Vladimir Fedorov and Vasilis Khadzipanagis would follow suit some 10 years later with Fedorov and An helping the USSR win the 1976 UEFA European U-18 Championship before

Fedorov won a bronze medal at the Olympic Games later that year.

After reaching the Soviet Cup final in 1968, Pakhtakor would go on to again finish sixth in 1982 thanks to 23 goals from Andrey Yakubik, with this achievement even more remarkable considering the events of just three years earlier as 17 players and staff died after their Belarus-bound plane collided with another aircraft over Ukraine.

Pakhtakor were protected from relegation for the next three years following the events of 11 August 1979, but after matching their best-ever finish in 1982, Pakhtakor were eventually





relegated in 1984.

While Pakhtakor were struggling to re-group in the First Division, 1987 saw Mirdjalal Kasimov make his mark on the international stage by captaining the USSR side to victory in the FIFA U-16 World Championship in Canada before making his debut for the Cotton Growers later that year.

And a year later Kasimov helped the USSR win the 1988 UEFA European U-18 Championship.

Pakhtakor would eventually return to the top flight for the final season of the Soviet League in 1991 and finished 14th.

In their 22 seasons in the top flight, Pakhtakor recorded 212 wins, 211 draws and suffered 299 defeats before State Independence heralded the arrival of the Uzbek domestic league in 1992.

Pakhtakor would go on to dominate the domestic scene, winning the Uzbek League title for six straight seasons between 2002 and 2007.

That position of preeminence was brought to an end, however, by the arrival of cross-city rivals Bunyodkor, who have dominated the domestic scene in recent years by winning

four consecutive league titles, although Pakhtakor landed a record ninth Uzbek League title in 2012.

Internationally, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan played their first match in June 1992 and shared a 2-2 draw with Tajikistan.

And just two years later, Uzbekistan would win all seven games at the 1994 Asian Games to claim the gold medal with Yuriy Sheykin named the best goalkeeper, Kasimov the best midfielder and Igor Shkvyrin as the top goalscorer.

## 2-2

*Uzbekistan played their first international following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in June 1992 and drew with Tajikistan*

A first AFC Asian Cup appearance would soon follow in 1996 and after reaching back-to-back quarter-finals in 2004 and 2007, Uzbekistan finished fourth at the 2011 edition in Qatar.

A place at the FIFA World Cup finals has so far proved elusive, although Uzbekistan came agonisingly close to qualifying for the 2006

edition in Germany, losing out to Bahrain in a play-off to determine which nation would meet Trinidad and Tobago in a final eliminator for a berth in the finals.

But, while they still wait for a first appearance at the FIFA World Cup, Uzbekistan have enjoyed considerable success at youth level in recent years, culminating in last year's AFC U-16 Championship victory.

Akobir Turaev's equaliser at the start of the second half of the final against Japan proved crucial before Uzbekistan prevailed 3-1 on penalties to claim the title for the first time.

And the foundations for the future of football in Uzbekistan will be helped by the considerable investment in Bunyodkor's academy, which sits in the shadows of their new 35,000-seater home.

Several small-sided artificial pitches were also installed at the Uzbekistan Football Federation headquarters next to Pakhtakor Stadium to mark the country's 20th anniversary in 2011 to accompany the full-sided pitch built as part of FIFA's Goal development programme in 2007.





*Above* Odil Ahmedov now plays in Russia with Anzhi Makhachkala after beginning his career with Pakhtakor.

*Right* Mirdjalal Kasimov is now the coach of both the national team and domestic heavyweights Bunyodkor.

*Left* Uzbekistan international Server Djeparov (left) was named AFC Player of the Year in 2008 and 2011.

*Below* The 100th anniversary of football in Uzbekistan was marked with a lavish ceremony at Bunyodkor Stadium.



# Q&A



**UFF President  
Mirabror Usmanov**

**Uzbekistan have enjoyed success recently at both domestic and international level, particularly at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup and in the 2011 AFC Cup. How has this been achieved?**

When I was first elected as Uzbekistan Football Federation President in 2006, I had a goal to strengthen the base of national football and its infrastructure before demanding results from the national teams as well as domestic football clubs. I talked to Mr. Islam Karimov, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, who is doing a lot to support the Uzbekistan Football Federation to be one of the strongest and most prestigious organisations, not only in Uzbekistan but in Asia. He once told me that for the time being the most important thing is to attract football fans to the stadiums and then to achieve better results through improving facilities. We did it this way, but we also used our internal working plan. We have a good plan with a hard-working team.

**What part has the UFF played to ensure the growth of football in Uzbekistan?**

We have now established youth football schools for all professional football clubs. We have attracted qualified coaches for schools with improved salaries. We have improved the facilities and the budget of the schools through the Fund of Support of Uzbekistan Football. We have built 12 football schools and four football academies and football pitches to support the "Football for People" project which intends to develop youth football through building a good infrastructure.

**This year marks the 100th anniversary of football in Uzbekistan. What is the future of football in Uzbekistan and what projects are in place to help football in Uzbekistan grow further?**

I am expecting a lot from our youth and grassroots. The future is theirs. I expect them to be the bones of the national team of Uzbekistan in future. They really deserve it because they are the boys who were born in independent Uzbekistan. They have different thoughts and feelings.



# REPUTATION ON THE LINE

WIDELY HAILED AS HIS COUNTRY'S GREATEST EVER PLAYER, MIRDJALAL KASIMOV IS NOW SETTING HIS SIGHTS ON STEERING UZBEKISTAN TO THEIR FIRST EVER FIFA WORLD CUP FINALS WHILE KEEPING ONE EYE ON CONTINENTAL GLORY WITH BUNYODKOR.

By: Andrew Mullen • Photos: World Sport Group

**D**iminutive in size, Mirdjalal Kasimov more than makes up for his lack of physical stature with the sheer enormity of this reputation thanks to his long list of achievements on the field for Uzbekistan.

But should the former playmaker earn his country a berth in Brazil 2014, the certainty is his standing both at home and internationally would reach unprecedented heights.

Having endured the pain of narrowly missing out on qualification for Germany 2006, Kasimov knows better than most what it means to the people of the Central

Asian republic to qualify for the FIFA World Cup finals.

With back-to-back wins over Qatar and Iran in late 2012 moving Kasimov's side a point clear at the top of Group B ahead of the resumption of the final round of qualifiers in March, the 42-year-old will be hoping his triumphant run as a player is replicated on the other side of the touchline.

Success has followed Kasimov throughout his career, and he started early: he was crowned World and European champion while still a teenager, captaining the USSR side that won the 1987 FIFA U-16 World Championship – which is now the FIFA U-17 World







*Right* Kasimov helped Uzbekistan reach the quarter-finals at the 2004 AFC Asian Cup.

*Below* Playing against Oman during the qualifiers for the 2002 FIFA World Cup.



Cup – in Canada after edging out Nigeria on penalties in Toronto.

Twelve months later in Czechoslovakia, the USSR saw off a Portugal side who would go onto win the FIFA World Youth Championship a year later in extra-time to win the 1988 UEFA European Under-18 Championships.

Those early achievements were to prove to be the perfect platform upon which to build an impressive playing career, but for now the modest former midfielder is refusing to rest on his laurels.

“At the moment I do not think a lot about those achievements because I am still involved with football. Maybe when I retire I will think about that period of my career,” says Kasimov.

“Those successes did, though, have a huge influence on my career because when I returned from Canada I was a world champion and my dream had come true. I then got an invitation to play for the people’s team, Pakhtakor.”

The break-up of the Soviet Union did not halt Kasimov’s success as he was named the best midfielder at the 1994 Asian Games as Uzbekistan historically claimed the gold medal after winning all seven games.

“Our country had only been independent for just three years and many other countries did not recognise us. We were proud when

**“I was more upset because the national team had failed to qualify for the World Cup than the fact that I had finished my career because we had never been so close to qualifying for the World Cup.”**

our flag was raised and our anthem was played in Hiroshima,” says Kasimov.

“The fact that our opponents did not know a lot about us played a big role in our victory. In the first match we beat Saudi Arabia, who had played at the World Cup, 4-1 and suddenly the other teams in the competition noticed us. But they were too late as we won seven matches to become champions.”

Having helped Uzbekistan reach the quarter-finals of the 2004 AFC Asian Cup as captain, qualification for the FIFA World Cup, though, agonisingly proved one step too far for Uzbekistan and Kasimov, as Bahrain prevailed in the play-offs for 2006 on away goals.

“After this I decided to end my football career,” says Kasimov. “I was more upset because the national team had failed to qualify for the World Cup than the fact that I had finished my career because we had never been so close to qualifying for the World Cup.”

The four-time Uzbekistan Player of the Year also enjoyed a stellar domestic career and won the Russian League title with Alania Vladikavkaz in 1995 before helping

Pakhtakor to the Uzbek League title in 1998 and 2003.

After a spell in the United Arab Emirates with Al Shabab in 2003 having opted against a move to Spain earlier in his career, Kasimov eventually ended his playing days with Mashal in 2005 before joining the coaching staff.

“I had a chance to move to Spain with

**“Being World and European champion is also important, particularly after being given the World Cup by king of football, Pele. That left a lasting impression.”**

Real Valladolid. I thought a lot about the chance to continue as a player in Spain, but my wife was pregnant with our second child at the time and my parents also needed help,” says Kasimov.



**“If we are unable to achieve our goals it will have a negative influence on my reputation, but the reputation of Uzbekistan is more important for me. I put the success of Uzbekistan above my own.”**

“It was not only about the money which I could send back, it was also about the fact a man should be with his family at home. For me, family was more valuable and I decided to stay at home.”

In total, Kasimov made 67 appearances for Uzbekistan scoring 31 goals in a 13-year international career with his goal-scoring record only recently overtaken by Maksim Shatskikh.

“Every success is a precious one. If we talk about pride, the triumph at the Asian Games is the most important,” says Kasimov.

“Being World and European champion is also important, particularly after being given the World Cup by the king of football, Pele. That left an impression.

“I now have two goals. One is to help Bunyodkor win the AFC Champions

League and the other is to take the national team to the World Cup. If I can achieve these I will be satisfied.

“I achieved a lot as a player, but I was unable to qualify for the World Cup. If I am able to achieve this as a coach this will make me very happy.

“When the president of the Uzbekistan Football Federation asked me to manage the national team I agreed without hesitation because your homeland is your home.

“If we are unable to achieve our goals it will have a negative influence on my reputation, but the reputation of Uzbekistan is more important for me. I put the success of Uzbekistan above my own.

“I set myself big targets during my playing career and the results show that I was able to achieve those. Now I am a coach I also have big goals. Football is about delivering happiness to the fans and I want to try and continue that.”

Next up for Uzbekistan on the road to Brazil 2014 is a meeting with Lebanon in Tashkent at the end of March, while by that time, Bunyodkor will have travelled to Japan to face domestic champions Sanfrecce Hiroshima before entertaining Korea Republic's Pohang Steelers in the Group Stage of the AFC Champions League having returned to the semi-finals in 2012.

*Below Equally as passionate in the dugout after making 67 appearances for Uzbekistan.*



**Mirdjalal Kasimov**

**Nationality:**  
Uzbekistan

**DOB:**  
17/09/1970

**Position:**  
Midfielder (Retired)

**Current club:**  
Bunyodkor (Uzbekistan)

**Previous clubs:**  
Pakhtakor (Uzbekistan),  
Dinamo Minsk (Belarus),  
Alania Vladikavkaz (Russia),  
Krilya Sovetov Samara  
(Russia), Al Shabab  
(United Arab Emirates),  
Mashal (Uzbekistan)





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# LION OF MESOPOTAMIA

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FOR A DECADE, STRIKER YOUNUS MAHMOOD HAS HEADLINED A GENERATION OF IRAQI PLAYERS THAT HAS PERFORMED BEYOND EXPECTATIONS AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL IN ASIA. BUT, AS THE 2007 AFC ASIAN CUP WINNING CAPTAIN PREPARES TO WIND DOWN HIS INTERNATIONAL CAREER, HE HAS SET HIS SIGHTS ON ONE FINAL ACHIEVEMENT: PLAYING AT THE FIFA WORLD CUP.

By: Michael Church • Photos: World Sport Group







*Right* Against Japan during the final round of qualifiers for the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

*Below* Iraq began the final round of qualifying for the 2014 FIFA World Cup with a 1-1 draw against Jordan.



There are few images more iconic in Asian football: with his mouth wide open in a celebratory roar, Younus Mahmood hoists the AFC Asian Cup trophy high into the Jakarta night sky as Iraq complete a remarkable triumph over Saudi Arabia in the final of the 2007 championship.

Mahmood's towering header – his fourth goal of the tournament – secured Iraq's first-ever AFC Asian Cup title and it remains a totemic moment in the history not only of the striker's career or in the pantheon of his own nation, but of the Asian game.

The 29-year-old – he celebrates his 30th birthday on March 2 – had, even by that relatively early stage of his career, earned himself a reputation as one of the deadliest strikers in Asia, and he has since gone on to cement his position among Asia's most feared forwards.

But despite a career that has so far seen him win the AFC Asian Cup, reach the semi-finals of the 2004 Olympic Games and win just about every piece of silverware available in his adopted home of Qatar – where he has played professionally since 2004, most successfully with Al Gharafa but also

**“I will stop after the World Cup for the national team. In my country – and in the Arab world – it's not the same as in European countries. When you are 29 or 30 they think you are too old.”**

with Al Khor, Al Arabi and Al Wakra – Mahmood is on the verge of retiring from the international scene.

Before calling it quits for his beloved nation, however, he has set his sights on a goal that has so far proved elusive: steering Iraq to the finals of the FIFA World Cup for only the second time in their history.

“This is my dream, to go to the World Cup,” said Mahmood, who scored six times in the third round of the qualifying competition for Brazil 2014. “I have done everything for my country, but we still haven't gone to the World Cup.

“This is the last chance for me because I know in my country and for the federation – they are good guys who do a lot for the game – that some people don't like the players and I think this will be a problem.

“I can't play for another four years to go to Russia, so this will be my last chance. So, Inshallah, we will qualify for Brazil.”

Iraq's recent record in qualifying for

the FIFA World Cup has been turbulent at best, and their attempts to reach the finals in Brazil have been no different to a blueprint that has become familiar for Iraqi football fans.

Former Japan coach Zico resigned from his position at the helm of the team in late 2012 having steered the Iraqis to third place in Group B, level on five points with second-placed Australia but well adrift of leaders Japan, who look to have booked their tickets for another FIFA World Cup appearance.

With the Iraqis not due to play in the upcoming round of qualifying matches on March 26, the three games in June – away to Oman before hosting Japan and travelling to meet Australia – will take on particular significance.

However, whether qualification is secured or not, this campaign will be Mahmood's last for Iraq, with the forward determined to call it a day on the international scene despite his relatively young age.

“I will stop after the World Cup for the



**“Marseille and Lyon came to try to take me to Europe but I didn’t go and everyone asks me why? But it was because I didn’t understand the outside world.”**

national team,” he says. “In my country – and in the Arab world – it’s not the same as in European countries. When you are 29 or 30 they think you are too old.

“But look in Europe, at players like Ryan Giggs. All the players are 32, 34 and it’s not a problem, they play. But in the Arabic world, if you are 32 you can still play but they say a lot of things. So I will stop.

“I have made something for my country, me and Nashat Akram and the other guys and now I will stop. I don’t need some guys to come in and tell the newspapers lies, it happens on TV and in the newspapers and they make things difficult. It’s not good, I don’t like this. I don’t need to play.

“I have left my family, I have left my business and I come for the national team and I play for my country but some people are complaining, saying I’m just doing things for the money. So I will stop, and it’s not only me, but I think others will too.”

Should he stand by his word, Mahmood and his team-mates will be hoping their international swansong takes place in Brazil next year when, after dealing with the rigours of qualifying by playing across the continent, the prospect of featuring in a centralised tournament fills the striker with confidence that Iraq can perform well.

“When Iraq play in one country, like at the Asian Cup, it’s good for us – in any cup, because we can stay in the same country and play four or five games. But in World Cup qualifying it’s harder because you have more time and we don’t have time to prepare,” he says.

“You have to fight for one-and-a-half years for the ticket for Brazil and we can’t do this. But when you have the cup in one country, we can take

*Right Mahmood scored six goals as Iraq secured a place in the final round of qualifiers for the 2014 FIFA World Cup.*

*Below Mahmood scored the only goal of the 2007 AFC Asian Cup final as Iraq edged out Saudi Arabia in Jakarta.*









the cup. We can all come together and it's not about time. We showed that at the Asian Cup or in other competitions.

"In the Arab tournaments, like the Gulf Cup is played in Bahrain and it's good for us. You don't need money, you go and stay in the hotel and you play and that's good. But for World Cup qualifiers you have to go to somewhere like South Korea to prepare and it costs money and it's hard for the coach to build a strong team and to make a strong game. It's hard for the players. We always have the same problem."

While Mahmood has achieved much in his career, the other glaring omission from his resume aside from an appearance at the finals of the FIFA World Cup, comes due to his reluctance to play outside the Middle East region.

Although Mahmood has spent over eight seasons in Qatar after joining Al Khor from Al Talaba in his homeland, there has long been a sense of what might have been about his career after he turned down opportunities in the aftermath of the 2007 AFC Asian Cup win to make a move to France.

"We have problems in our country but if we didn't have problems in

Iraq all of our players would play in Europe," he says. "Marseille and Lyon came to try to take me to Europe but I didn't go and everyone asks me why? But it was because I didn't understand the outside world.

"We had problems in Iraq, and one was that we only had two television channels and now it's different and I can stay in my room and I know what happens in America and everywhere. But before I was afraid. I was worried about not being able to talk, about whether I could eat. Now it's easy but then it was a problem and that's why I didn't go.

"But now all the time I think, my God why didn't I go! When I played with (former Lyon and Brazil midfielder) Juninho Pernambuchano he said it was normal that I go. He said I could play in Europe easily, but I was worried about not being able to speak the language and eat the food. This was my problem."

Perhaps Brazil next summer will finally provide the stage for Mahmood to show the world what Europe football missed and what Iraq and Asia have witnessed first hand for close to a decade.

*Left Celebrating scoring the equaliser against Oman during the final round of qualifiers for the 2014 FIFA World Cup with team-mate Basem Abbas.*

*Below With former Iraq coach Zico.*



**Younus Mahmood**

**Nationality:**

Iraq

**DOB:**

02/03/1983

**Position:**

Striker

**Current club:**

Al Wakrah (Qatar)

**Previous clubs:**

Al Talaba (Iraq), Al Wahda (UAE), Al Khor, Al Gharafa, Al Arabi (all Qatar)





# BUILT ON SOLID FOUNDATIONS

SAUDI ARABIA'S AL ITTIHAD ARE THE ONLY CLUB TO HAVE WON BACK-TO-BACK AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TITLES, CLAIMING THE TROPHY IN 2004 AND 2005. WITH ONE ADDITIONAL FINAL APPEARANCE AND TWO TRIPS TO THE COMPETITION'S SEMI-FINALS, THE JEDDAH SIDE ARE AN UNDOUBTED GIANT OF THE ASIAN CLUB SCENE.

By: Michael Church • Photos: World Sport Group

A glance at the club badge of Al Ittihad says everything anyone could ever want to know about how the Jeddah-based institution views itself: "We're number one!" it screams, the singular digit within the crest banishing all doubt over the club's perception of their status.

Rather than being an idle boast, though, the Saudi club's record speaks louder than any emblem on a shirt or crest above a clubhouse; Al Ittihad's honours list makes envious reading.

The first club to be crowned two-time AFC Champions League winners when they won the second of back-to-back continental championships in 2005, there

are few clubs throughout Asia capable of surpassing the status or stature of an institution that has existed since 1927 and whose trophy room is full-to-bursting with silverware.

Winning the AFC Champions League will always be a high water mark for the club, but added to that continental achievement is Al Ittihad's success in the final of the 1999 Asian Cup Winners' Cup, when they defeated Chunnam Dragons in Tokyo and a plethora of domestic and regional titles.

Eight Saudi League titles since 1981 along with seven Crown Prince Cups and six-time winners of the King's Cup mark Al Ittihad out as one of Saudi Arabia's preeminent clubs. Only their most bitter rivals – Riyadh-based Al Hilal – have more











domestic league titles.

For all their success, though, Al Ittihad's position as the leading club in the kingdom – and in Asia – has started to slip in recent seasons. From 1997 to 2009, Al Ittihad not only won the AFC Champions League twice but claimed seven of their eight Saudi league championships.

Since then, though, the power has shifted back towards Riyadh as Al Hilal – in 2010 and 2011 – and reigning champions Al Shabab have taken control, with Al Ittihad struggling last season to such an extent that the club missed out on qualifying for the 2013 edition of the AFC Champions League.

A poor start to the season under Dimitri

**"The foundation is not seen by anybody but it's a very important part of the building and once you have built the foundation you can build anything on it."**

**Al Ittihad president  
Mohammed Al Fayez**

**Founded:**  
1927

**Ground:**  
Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Stadium,  
Riyadh (21,842)

**Saudi League (8):**  
1982, 1997, 1999, 2000,  
2001, 2003, 2007, 2009

**Saudi Cup (7):**  
1958, 1959, 1963, 1991,  
1997, 2001, 2004

**AFC Champions League (2):**  
Champions  
2004, 2005; Runners-up 2009;  
Semi-finals 2011;  
Quarter-finals 2006;  
Group Stage 2008, 2010

**Asian Club Championship:**  
Quarter-finals 2001

**Asian Cup Winners' Cup (1):**  
Champions 1999, Semi-finals 1993

**Asian Super Cup:**  
Runners-up 1999

Davidovic followed by the truncated reign of Matjaz Kek, saw Spaniard Raul Caneda appointed head coach and, after an upswing in fortunes, Al Ittihad progressed as far as the semi-finals of the AFC Champions League, but a fifth place finish in the league still fell short of the expected standards.

As a result, changes were implemented and, in early August, a new board and president took control with the aim to restore Al Ittihad to the status referred to in the club's emblem.

"Last year there was a bit drop off in the club, not only for the football club, but in the administration and everything," says club president Mohammed Al Fayez, who heads up the new administration.

"I come from a true Ittihadi family and my uncle – who was ex-minister of petroleum and the former ambassador to Egypt – he played for Ittihad. When we saw the club in such a mess on the last day of the election, I nominated myself and I was elected as chairman.

"We came with a mission and a vision to be really a role model, not for football but





**“The fans own the club: they can come here and they can shout at us and complain if they want.”**  
**Al Ittihad vice president Adel Jamjoum**

*Left Prince  
 Abdullah Al Faisal  
 Stadium, Jeddah.*

*Top Right Hamad  
 Al Montashari.*

*Middle Spanish  
 coach Raul Caneda.*

*Bottom Right  
 Osama Al Harbi.*

for the youth of Jeddah. We will start from the academy until we reach the first team and teach not just sports but social manners and culture and we will teach safety so that parents will know they can leave their kids with us and not be afraid.

“And we have a vision to be one of the best 50 clubs in the world. If you have a vision you can achieve it. So, in the next four years we will be working so professionally.”

Al Fayezi and his board have brought in a raft of consultants to assess all facets of the organisation, with a view to professionalising the club and ensuring Al Ittihad progresses along the right path.

But he warns that the changes required will not happen over night.

“We can’t just have one target, we need to keep going,” he says. “I’m a civil engineer by training and to build a nice building you have

to have a nice foundation. The foundation is not seen by anybody but it’s a very important part of the building and once you have built the foundation you can build anything on it.

“In the past, they built a very nice building but without a foundation and when they left everything fell down. So that is why we have to have a good foundation and it’s not going to happen tomorrow, it will take time. But time is our enemy because we are fighting to correct the mistakes of the past.

“Football is a very important part of the whole equation. The fans want cups. But we have to have money, good human resources, good tools and then add them all together and then the second part of the equation is success. We are building all of those elements because if we have all of those elements then failure can’t happen.”

The importance of the club’s membership in shaping the future of Al Ittihad remains significant, and it is a fact that is not lost on the administration.

Tradition and reputation, though, are just as important to the hierarchy as the financial might being shown by clubs in other leagues around Asia.

“The fans own the club: they can come here and they can shout at us and complain if they want,” says vice president Adel Jamjoum. “At one time I was a fan and I was doing the same thing as they do to us.

“The Saudi League is one of the best in the Arab world and in Asia and, from our point of view, it is easier to attract top players because people know us and we are well known because we have been successful, although it is about money too.

“When we signed Diego Souza, for example, I didn’t have to tell him who the club was because he already knew who we were, I didn’t have to spend time doing that. If we had more money we could do more.

“Clubs in places like Qatar and China, with all respect to them, only have the money but at Al Ittihad we have both the money and the





*Top Left & Left  
Prince Abdullah Al  
Faisal Stadium,  
Jeddah.*

*Top Right  
Diego Souza.*

*Right With the  
AFC Champions  
League trophy in  
2005.*

tradition and players want this and so we can bring good players here."

It is the deep-rooted sense of the club's history and position within the game in Saudi Arabia that coach Caneda believes sets Al Ittihad apart from clubs across the rest of Asia.

"At this club, there is a lot of tradition and it is a professional club and we have the money and history, and these are important," he says. "There are a lot of things that you can't buy with money. There is a great spirit here and the players always show that when they play.

"Money always wins because without it nothing is possible and tradition is important because football is a cultural product and you can't buy that tradition immediately. In Saudi Arabia there is a good tradition of football and especially at Al Ittihad.

"If you are the coach of Ittihad, you have to fight for titles, important titles. In Europe now, there are very many new, important clubs like Manchester City, Chelsea or Paris St Germain, but at the clubs like Real Madrid you still need to be successful, you still need to win titles and it is the same at Al Ittihad."

Caneda's tenure has so far seen the

Spaniard steady the ship after a disappointing run early in the 2011-12 season that means Al Ittihad will not be playing in the 2013 edition of the AFC Champions League.

But despite their elimination at the hands of Al Ahli in the semi-finals last year, the new administration has chosen to stand by Caneda in the quest for continuity and stability.

"We have extended our coach's contract for the next three years," says Al Fayed. "He knows how to deal with people and people respect him.

"How long has Sir Alex Ferguson been in charge? He doesn't win the title every year but he has the foundation to build upon, and trust between management and the coach and trust between the players and the coach are very important.

"This triangle – players, management and coach – are very important. Everywhere in the world you have stars who have power and they can change the coach, but right now Caneda knows how to contain that and even the stars, he can put them on the bench and nobody argues about that. "

For all the changes and attempts to instill stability within the club, it is the bond between

the club and the fans that perhaps speaks loudest with regard to the status of Al Ittihad.

And it is those who have come through the ranks of the club's youth academy from within Jeddah's sprawling hinterland that can best sum up Al Ittihad's position within the affections of the supporters.

"When you play for Al Ittihad you feel like you are all together, we feel like we all come together like the fingers on a hand," says Al Ittihad icon Osama Al Harbi, who has spent his entire playing career with the club.

"You are part of a group, we are not individuals. We don't think about players being different to one another, we play with one heart and that's why we play so well together.

"I couldn't imagine playing for another club. My life is with Ittihad and my heart is with Ittihad, I couldn't imagine playing for another team. We are together as one family and the fans give us a lot of power. The fans and the team are all together, with one heart and I can't even think it would be like to play for another club."





# HAZAZI SOARING HIGH

SINCE EMERGING AS A TALENTED TEENAGER FOR BOTH AL ITTIHAD AND SAUDI ARABIA, NAIIF HAZAZI HAS BECOME ONE OF ASIA'S MOST PROMISING STRIKERS. NOW, HE'S SETTING HIS SIGHTS ON DISPLAYING HIS TALENTS ON AN EVEN BIGGER STAGE.

**N**aif Hazazi's nickname more than hints at the 24-year-old's most potent footballing attribute: with a reputation for flying through the air to nail his prey, it's fitting that the Al Ittihad striker is known as Al Saqr - the Falcon.

With eight goals in the 2012 AFC Champions League, Hazazi firmly established himself as a fitting successor to a long list of fearsome Saudi strikers: Majed Abdullah, Sami Al Jaber, Hamza Idris and Yasser Al Qahtani who have, at one time or another, been lauded as among the best the continent has to offer.

Now Hazazi is in the process of adding his name to that illustrious line-up, having burst onto the international scene in 2009 for Saudi Arabia and going on to prove himself, too, in the colours of Al Ittihad.

Al Ittihad may have missed out on adding to their two continental titles by losing to cross-Jeddah rivals Al Ahli in the semi-finals of last year's competition, but the desire to succeed at Asian level continues to drive both Hazazi and his club forward.

"When we play in Asia, it opens the eyes of the whole world and this is the way, too, for the players," says Hazazi, who missed his club's appearance in the 2009 AFC Champions League final, when they lost to Pohang Steelers in Tokyo.

"The whole world sees this competition and can see the players inside and for the players and the club it's more important than the local league. It's very important for Al Ittihad.

"To be champions of Asia, it's the dream of any player in any team and when you get to be champion it's the way to go to the FIFA Club World Cup. It's a famous competition and we want to play there against the top players in the world.

"Sure it was very stressful to be injured before the 2009 final because I was hoping I could do something. But we have to respect the outcome and this is what happened. There's nothing we can do about it, it's not in our hands unfortunately."

While Hazazi has been widely compared to Saudi Arabia and Al Nassr legend Abdullah, it is towards a former team-mate that he looks for inspiration.

Hamza Idris, one of the Middle East's finest strikers of his generation, remains an icon at Al Ittihad, and it was he who Hazazi replaced in the team once the 1994 World Cup veteran and 1996 AFC Asian Cup winner retired.

"I think 80% of my skills are like Hamza, he was dangerous inside the box and that's my style of play too," says Hazazi. "But I need more time and more hard work to be like Hamza.

"Also, I want to be more than Hamza, I want to be a famous name in Saudi Arabia on my own and have people talk about me, Naif Hazazi.

"But that's going to take more hard work and more time and that's what I'm trying to do, but while I'm working with the other players. I can't do that on my own; we have to work together as a team."

Hazazi's performances over the last three years have been of sufficient calibre to attract attention from outside Saudi Arabia and he has set his sights on eventually trying out his talents beyond the boundaries of his homeland.

And he wants to do so before it is too late to make the most of the opportunities that present themselves.

"The clubs make a big mistake by not allowing players to leave before the age of 25, but as players we need to be given the chance when we are young,

not only when we are 28 or 29 because we cannot go there and play well with European teams if we are not 100% ready," he says.

"We will find when we go there that other players already there are better than us. The clubs should give us a chance when we are young to go outside and try and improve our skills so we can ultimately go and play for famous clubs."

That reluctance, he believes, is one of the reasons the Saudi Arabia national team has fallen on hard times in recent years.

After dominating Asian football during the 1980s and 1990s – winning the AFC Asian Cup on three occasions and qualifying for four straight FIFA World Cup finals – the Saudis missed out on South Africa 2010 and failed to reach the final phase of qualifying for the 2014 Brazil finals.

"When the clubs and the federation don't allow the players to go outside this will leave the players at one level and they won't improve the level," says Hazazi.

"And it's not just about going to Europe, but it would be good if we were able to play elsewhere in the Gulf because that would allow the players to improve themselves and allow them to play more and improve their skills and also allow people to see them more and more.

"The clubs won't let the players go out and it means that the national team stays at the same level or even it goes down.

"Things won't improve for another four years at least, but we can close the gap with our new national team because the younger players will give the team a new level and hopefully things will improve."







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# PEAK PERFORMANCE

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EUGENE GALEKOVIC  
IS TESTAMENT TO THE  
LONG-HELD VIEW THAT  
GOALKEEPERS ONLY REACH  
THEIR PEAK AT AN AGE WHEN  
MOST OUTFIELD PLAYERS ARE  
SEEN TO BE REACHING THE  
END OF THE THEIR CAREERS  
AT THE TOP LEVEL.

By: Andrew Mullen • Photos: World Sport Group









*Below & Right  
Galekovic helped  
Adelaide reach  
the quarter-finals  
of the 2012 AFC  
Champions League.*



**H**is 32nd birthday may be looming at the end of June, but Eugene Galekovic's stock has continued to rise in recent seasons with the two-time A-League Goalkeeper of the Year playing a central and often heroic role in Adelaide United's run to the quarter-finals of the 2012 AFC Champions League.

And after his performances as the Reds reached the final of the 2008 edition earned Galekovic international recognition for the first time for Australia during the qualifiers for the 2011 AFC Asian Cup, the former Melbourne Victory custodian is back in the frame to press 40-year-old Mark Schwarzer for the Australia number one shirt.

Galekovic shared the Socceroos' goalkeeping duties in December's preliminary rounds of the 2013 EAFF East Asian Cup with Central Coast Mariners' Mathew Ryan in Hong Kong, the Reds custodian making two appearances as Australia edged out DPR Korea on goal difference to complete the line-up for the four-team finals alongside Japan, Korea Republic and China.

After making his international debut in January 2009 against Indonesia – with his last outing coming in March 2010 against the same opposition having also featured twice against Kuwait – Galekovic's appearances in the shutout wins over Hong Kong and Guam took his total of international caps to six.

Now, the man who was between the posts when Adelaide reached the final of the 2008 AFC Champions League final, is hoping for further international exposure.

"I was happy to represent my county. I am in a difficult position as I am playing in the A-League and Mark Schwarzer is playing in the English Premier League, and you have also got other players playing in higher leagues so obviously they are great

**"I am just happy for the opportunity and I have been to a FIFA World Cup. It would have been nice to play more, but I have to be playing at a higher level."**

goalkeepers," says Galekovic.

"I am just happy for the opportunity and I have been to a FIFA World Cup. It would have been nice to play more, but I have to be playing at a higher level."

Galekovic had initially been left out of the 23-man squad for South Africa 2010, but after Brad Jones withdrew after his son was diagnosed with leukemia, Australia coach Pim Verbeek called-up the Adelaide goalkeeper as a replacement.

"It was a strange feeling Brad being a member of the squad as well and I got on well with him and the news was obviously devastating," adds Galekovic.

"It was bitter sweet, I got a chance to go but it wasn't for the right reasons."

Galekovic had earned his chance to represent the Socceroos after playing a key role as Adelaide became the first A-League side to reach the final of the AFC Champions League in 2008.

He posted six clean sheets during the 2008 continental campaign, although Galekovic did miss the second leg of the final due to suspension as Adelaide eventually succumbed 5-0 on aggregate to Japan's Gamba Osaka.

"In terms of club football, every game was like a final as no one backed us, we were underdogs," says Galekovic. "We just kept winning all the way to the final, but obviously the final was disappointing."

Having started his career with National Soccer League (NSL) sides South Melbourne and Eastern Pride, Galekovic had returned to Australia to join Melbourne for the inaugural 2005-06 A-League season having tried his luck in Europe with Portuguese side Beira Mar.

After helping Australia reach the quarter-finals of the 2004 Olympic Games and with the NSL disbanding in preparation for the start of the new professional A-League, the timing was perfect for Galekovic to test himself in Europe.

Galekovic ultimately only played two games during his time in the Western Portuguese city of Aveiro due to the presence of former Czech Republic international Pavel Srnec before returning to Australia, but he has fond memories of his season in Europe.

"Back when I started as an 18-year-old it was the old NSL, it wasn't as professional as it is these days so I am still grateful to Eastern Pride and South Melbourne





**Eugene Galekovic**

**Nationality:**

Australia

**DOB:**

11/06/1981

**Position:**

Goalkeeper

**Current club:**

Adelaide United (Australia)

**Previous clubs:**

Eastern Pride, South Melbourne (both Australia), Beira Mar (Portugal), Melbourne Victory (Australia)

**“I jumped at the chance to join Adelaide as with Michael playing at Melbourne I wasn’t getting a look in. So with six months left on my contract, I jumped at the chance, and it is probably the best decision of my career so far.”**

for giving me that opportunity,” says Galekovic.

“Then the NSL went down and there was a year in between when there was no football in Australia and I took the opportunity to go to Portugal after the Olympics.

“Portugal was a great experience, although Pavel Srnicek was there and I only played two games. But I learned a lot from Pavel and my time abroad was an experience.”

With the A-League ushering in a new professional era in Australia, Galekovic returned from Portugal and joined hometown club Melbourne and he started the first game as the Victory shared a 1-1 draw with Sydney FC.

But Ernie Merrick’s side ultimately failed to live up to pre-season expectations and the Victory finished second from bottom of the new eight-team league with Galekovic forced to share goalkeeping duties with Michael Theoklitos.

Galekovic initially found himself second choice for the following season, but after an injury to Theoklitos, he helped Melbourne win the A-League Premiership.

Theoklitos, however, returned as Melbourne won the A-League Grand Final with a 6-0 win over Adelaide, Galekovic started the 2007-08 season on the bench and eventually joined the Reds midway through the campaign.

“It was tough with the rotation policy at Melbourne. I am not a coach and that was his idea and it didn’t work in the first season, you can see that by the results,” says Galekovic.

“Knowing that you weren’t going to play in two weeks, it was a bit strange, but Ernie Merrick learnt and in the second year he decided to stick with a number one.”

Galekovic has been a virtual ever-present for the Reds since and won the A-League Goalkeeper of the Year Award in 2009 and 2010.

*Above Galekovic joined Adelaide from Melbourne in 2007.*

And with John Kosmina returning to a struggling Adelaide at the end of 2011, Galekovic was named captain and played an instrumental role as the Reds reached the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League.

Galekovic posted another five clean sheets during the campaign having made a number of vital saves, particularly against Japan’s Nagoya Grampus in the last 16 when he denied Australia striker Josh Kennedy a certain opener before Adelaide went onto win 1-0.

The Reds eventually lost in the last eight to Bunyodkor, but his efforts rightly did not go unnoticed as he earned a recall to the Australia ranks for the 2013 EAFF East Asian Cup qualifiers.

While Fulham’s Schwarzer seemingly has both hands on the number one jersey for the ongoing qualifying campaign for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and potentially next year’s showpiece tournament in Brazil, Galekovic’s presence will keep the veteran custodian on his toes.

And a second trip to the FIFA World Cup is by no means out of the question for Galekovic with the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in Australia also looming just around the corner.



## On The Road Down Under

WITH THE UNVEILING OF THE TOURNAMENT LOGO AT THE END OF LAST YEAR AND THE START OF THE QUALIFIERS IN FEBRUARY, AUSTRALIA'S HOSTING OF THE AFC ASIAN CUP 2015 IS COMING INTO FOCUS.

**T**he AFC Asian Cup 2015 will move a step closer in February with the start of the 20-team qualifying round which will determine the 11 nations that will join the likes of hosts Australia and defending champions Japan at the finals of the quadrennial continental championship.

Only two teams from each of the five groups are guaranteed qualification for the finals, which will take place in January 2015, and the pick of the draw sees three-time champions Saudi Arabia and 2007 winners Iraq drawn together alongside two-time finalists China.

Indonesia complete an intriguing Group C alongside 1984, 1988 and 1996 champions

Saudi Arabia, Iraq – who claimed a historic win in 2007 after beating the Green Falcons 1-0 in the final – and 1984 and 2004 runners-up China.

But while the nations aiming for a place in the finals are fine-tuning their approach for the qualifiers, preparations in Australia for the hosting of the competition have been continuing apace.

“As in any event, we are working on a timeline with different tasks to achieve and I can safely say that we are on track,” says AFC Asian Cup Organising Committee Chairman and AFC Vice-President HRH Tengku Abdullah Ibni Sultan Ahmad Shah.

“The competition is two years away and we are in the final stage of venue selection





including stadium, training fields and hotels and the drafting of the match schedule.

"AFC has conducted a number of inspection visits to all facilities to be used for the competition and is quite satisfied with the preparation works done by the Australian Local Organising Committee (ALOC)."

The qualifying rounds will see Jordan meet neighbours Syria as well as Oman and Singapore in Group A, while three-time champions Iran headline Group B alongside Kuwait, Thailand and Lebanon.

Uzbekistan, who reached the semi-finals in 2011, will face the United Arab Emirates, Vietnam and Hong Kong in Group E during the qualifiers which finish in March next year,

**"I hope that after the AFC Asian Cup 2015, football becomes the most popular sport in Australia. This will be the best legacy from the AFC Asian Cup 2015 for the sports loving people of Australia."**

**AFC Asian Cup Organising Committee Chairman and AFC Vice-President HRH Tengku Abdullah ibni Sultan Ahmad Shah**

**"The preliminary draw has thrown up some great contests, and we are sure to see some exciting matches over the next 18 months."**  
**AFC Acting President Zhang Jilong**

with Group D containing 2011 hosts Qatar, Bahrain, Yemen and Malaysia.

Defending champions Japan, hosts Australia and Korea Republic – who finished third in the 2011 edition of the tournament – have all qualified automatically for the finals.

DPR Korea, winners of the 2012 AFC Challenge Cup, and the champions in the 2014 edition of the same competition will also feature at the finals.

"The preliminary draw has thrown up some great contests, and we are sure to see some exciting matches over the next 18 months," says AFC Acting President Zhang Jilong.

"We're thrilled that AFC's newest member, Australia, will be hosting Asia's flagship national team competition for the first time."

Prior to the draw, the finals had already moved a step closer to reality as the official tournament logo was launched.

Designed by Sydney agency Witekite, the unveiling of the logo marked a major move towards Australia's hosting of the tournament in which the Socceroos will seek to become Asian champions for the first time.

The logo depicts a stylised player, kicking a football from the east coast towards the rest of Asia, with the ball also representing the Australian summer sun arcing west from Australia to Asia.

The four golden bands forming the map of Australia represent the four host cities and the design is completed by the Australia 2015 script, in a relaxed personal handwritten style.

"There are number of events scheduled in the upcoming months such as the mascot launch, draw for the finals, team workshop, trophy tour, etc.," says HRH Tengku Abdullah.

"AFC has no doubt that the AFC Asian Cup 2015 will be a celebration of football in Australia, taking into consideration Australia's passion for sport. Moreover, whenever there is an international football match, fans from Australia have shown great support to the Socceroos and the attendance for their FIFA World Cup qualification matches is very high.

"As we all know, there are big Asian communities in Australia from many different countries who will not want to miss their

*Above Former Australia internationals John Aloisi and Alan Davidson helped AFC Executive Director of Competitions Windsor John conduct the draw.*



*Above AFC Asian Cup Organising Committee Chairman and AFC Vice-President HRH Tengku Abdullah Ibni Sultan Ahmad Shah delivers his speech prior to the draw in Melbourne.*

*Left Acting AFC President Zhang Jilong addresses delegates upon the launch of the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 logo.*

national team playing high level matches in the AFC Asian Cup."

With the draw finalised and the tournament logo unveiled, attention shifts in April towards the naming of the host cities and stadiums with the matches due to be played across Australia's east coast.

Seeking to build on Australia's successful hosting of the 2000 Olympic Games, 2003 Rugby World Cup and 2006 Commonwealth Games, the 2015 AFC Asian Cup has the potential to further enhance football's presence in Australia following the introduction of the A-League in 2005.

"Everyone involved in the AFC Asian Cup is well aware that football has great potential and the AFC Asian Cup 2015 will be a catalyst to spur Australian football to the next level comparable to rugby and cricket," says HRH Tengku Abdullah.

"I hope that after the AFC Asian Cup 2015, football becomes the most popular sport in Australia. This will be the best legacy from the AFC Asian Cup 2015 for the sports loving people of Australia.

"Secondly, the AFC Asian Cup 2015 is a very important showcase for Australia by which the world can watch and judge if Australia can bid to host a future FIFA World Cup. I firmly believe that Australia is capable of hosting the biggest football competitions."





# Preliminary Draw



## **Group A**      **Jordan • Syria • Oman • Singapore**

06/02/13	Jordan v Singapore	Oman v Syria
22/03/13	Singapore v Oman	Syria v Jordan
15/10/13	Jordan v Oman	Singapore v Syria
15/11/13	Syria v Singapore	Oman v Jordan
19/11/13	Singapore v Jordan	Syria v Oman
05/03/14	Jordan v Syria	Oman v Singapore

## **Group B**      **IR Iran • Kuwait • Thailand • Lebanon**

06/02/13	IR Iran v Lebanon	Thailand v Kuwait
22/03/13	Lebanon v Thailand	Kuwait v IR Iran
15/10/13	Lebanon v Kuwait	IR Iran v Thailand
15/11/13	Kuwait v Lebanon	Thailand v IR Iran
19/11/13	Lebanon v IR Iran	Kuwait v Thailand
05/03/14	IR Iran v Kuwait	Thailand v Lebanon

## **Group C**      **Iraq • China PR • Saudi Arabia • Indonesia**

06/02/13	Iraq v Indonesia	Saudi Arabia v China PR
22/03/13	Indonesia v Saudi Arabia	China PR v Iraq
15/10/13	Indonesia v China PR	Iraq v Saudi Arabia
15/11/13	China PR v Indonesia	Saudi Arabia v Iraq
19/11/13	Indonesia v Iraq	China PR v Saudi Arabia
05/03/14	Iraq v China PR	Saudi Arabia v Indonesia

## **Group D**      **Qatar • Bahrain • Yemen • Malaysia**

06/02/13	Qatar v Malaysia	Yemen v Bahrain
22/03/13	Malaysia v Yemen	Bahrain v Qatar
15/10/13	Malaysia v Bahrain	Qatar v Yemen
15/11/13	Bahrain v Malaysia	Yemen v Qatar
19/11/13	Malaysia v Qatar	Bahrain v Yemen
05/03/14	Qatar v Bahrain	Yemen v Malaysia

## **Group E**      **Uzbekistan • United Arab Emirates • Vietnam • Hong Kong**

06/02/13	Vietnam v United Arab Emirates	Uzbekistan v Hong Kong
22/03/13	Hong Kong v Vietnam	United Arab Emirates v Uzbekistan
15/10/13	Hong Kong v United Arab Emirates	Uzbekistan v Vietnam
15/11/13	Vietnam v Uzbekistan	United Arab Emirates v Hong Kong
19/11/13	Hong Kong v Uzbekistan	United Arab Emirates v Vietnam
05/03/14	Vietnam v Hong Kong	Uzbekistan v United Arab Emirates

# New Era for AFC & UEFA

The AFC and European counterparts UEFA signalled a new era in relations between the two confederations by signing a wide-ranging Memorandum of Understanding at the end of November.

AFC Acting President Zhang Jilong and UEFA President Michel Platini penned the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that will promote co-operation and friendly relations between the two confederations at a ceremony at AFC House.

The ground-breaking agreement will pave the way to exchange information, knowledge and good practices on matters of common interest ushering in a new era of closer ties between the AFC and UEFA.

"As UEFA is the benchmark of top quality football, we are proud to have this historical MoU signed with them, this partnership will definitely raise our standard," said AFC Acting President Zhang.

The agreement will see UEFA provide assistance to AFC and its Member Associations in establishing and implementing projects and activities relating to education, training, technical development, refereeing, promotion of grassroots and youth football.



"We just signed the MoU, so the next step for the administration is to identify appropriate areas in competitions or technical development," said UEFA President Platini.

FIFA Vice President and AFC Executive Committee member HRH Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein and AFC General Secretary Dato' Alex Soosay were also present at the ceremony alongside UEFA Vice Presidents Senes Erzik and Marios N. Lefkartis.

"We will look for the appropriate areas where we can work together and will definitely provide feedback," said HRH Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein.





# Suppiah Passes Away

**T**he first Asian referee to officiate at a FIFA World Cup, George Suppiah, passed away in Singapore at the start of December aged 83 following a long battle with diabetes.

Suppiah created history when he took charge of the first round meeting between Poland and Haiti at the 1974 World Cup in Germany.

He also acted as a linesman for the meetings between Sweden and Bulgaria and Holland and Brazil.

In 2009, the former teacher received a special award from FIFA following 25 years of service as a referee's instructor, while in the same year Suppiah was also presented with the AFC Distinguished Service and Gold Service Awards.

"It was with great sadness that I received the news of Asian refereeing icon George Suppiah's death," said AFC Acting President Zhang Jilong.

"Mr. Suppiah was the face of Asian refereeing and made us all proud when he created history by becoming the first Asian referee to officiate a FIFA World Cup game in 1974 in then West Germany.

"On behalf of the AFC Executive Committee and the entire Asian football family, I would like to offer my deepest condolences to his family, friends and the football fraternity of Singapore. His great contribution to our confederation and the world of refereeing will never be forgotten."



## AFC Approves Referees

**T**he AFC Referees Committee, which met under the chairmanship of Thailand's Dato' Worawi Makudi, has approved the list of AFC referees for next year.

The committee also approved the list of referee instructors, assessors, futsal instructors and assessors and fitness instructors for 2013.

The criteria for the withdrawal of referees and implementation of the Pilot Member Association Project under a strategic plan for referees' development was also approved, while members also



agreed on a selection plan for participants of the AFC Project Future Referees Course.

The committee also discussed the implementation of additional assistant referees and goal-line technology in future AFC competitions.

"We have passed through many big tournaments since we last met and I would like to thank all the members for their efforts," said Dato' Worawi.

"Asian referees showed their skills at the Olympics and other FIFA competitions this year and I would like to compliment them on their superb performance."

# AFC Exco Sets April Date For Congress and Elections

The AFC Executive Committee unanimously decided to hold the AFC Congress by the end of April 2013 and organise elections for AFC and FIFA Executive Committee positions.

Meeting at AFC House before the AFC Annual Awards at the end of November, the AFC Executive Committee approved elections for the positions of one female AFC Vice-President, two female members to the AFC Executive Committee and one position on the FIFA Executive Committee.

The members also decided to hold an election for the position of the AFC President during the AFC Congress, subject to the recommendations and advice of the AFC Legal Committee by mid-January.

"Under my caretaker leadership, I promised a new vision for AFC," said AFC Acting President Zhang Jilong.

"I committed myself to a new era of transparency and I am confident that with your support I will be able to deliver this objective."



## Oman Eye ACL Participation



The Oman Football Association aims to launch a professional league from the 2013-2014 season, which they hope will pave the way for participation in the AFC Champions League.

A delegation from the Oman Football Association met with AFC officials, headed by AFC Competitions Executive Director Windsor John, at AFC House in Kuala Lumpur at the end of November.

They discussed the start of the league while also obtaining a briefing on the AFC Champions League criteria and required clubs licensing system.

"We are very happy to be here to get the AFC's guidance for our project and future participation in the AFC Champions League," said Oman Football Association Vice President Saleh Abdullah Al-Farsi.

"As explained, we will launch a professional football league in Oman from next season and by meeting the ACL criteria, we'd like to move forward to develop our professional football in the country, which will help us participate in the AFC Champions League in the end."

Officials from Korea Republic and Malaysia also recently met with the AFC for similar discussions.



# Assistant Referees Prepare For New Year

**P**reparations for the 2013 calendar stepped up in December with AFC Elite Assistant Referee courses taking place in Kuala Lumpur and Dubai.

Amendments to the Laws of the Game and match analysis were some of the topics discussed, while physical fitness training was also high on the agenda.

"The referees and assistant referees are very important people with high responsibilities. They are an important element in football," said UAE Football Association Vice President Salem Obaid Al Shamsi at the opening of the course in Dubai.

"Here in the UAE, the referees and assistant referees are given enough training to ensure they are well trained and well looked after. For the development of football in Asia, the referees and assistant referees must also be included for development."

The elite courses are held annually to prepare Asia's top referees and assistant referees for duty in the upcoming year.



## 'Kick Off' Initiative Launched



**T**he AFC's new development programme, which will focus on assisting with the management and marketing of national leagues and participating clubs, will be called "Kick Off."

The committee, under the chairmanship of AFC Vice President HRH Tengku Abdullah Ibni Sultan Ahmad Shah of Malaysia, approved implementation of the programme in Bangladesh, Iran, Jordan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

FIFA and UEFA will also support the implementation of the programme by sending experts in the respective fields.

"Our target is to reach the pinnacle of world football and we must work hard to improve all areas to achieve this goal," said AFC Acting President Zhang Jilong.

"The Member Associations (MAs) need our expertise and guidance to professionalise and take their game to a higher level. I am hopeful that the new programme will benefit the MAs."

Upon request from Football Federation Australia, the committee also approved the implementation of the programme in the domestic W-League.

## Praise For Pro Diploma Course

**T**he participants of an AFC Professional Coaching Diploma Course held at the Paju National Football Center in Korea Republic hailed the opportunity to upgrade their knowledge and skills.

The Pro Diploma course, which was held at the end of November, was designed to teach the highest standards for club and national team coaching to coaches already holding the 'A' Coaching Certificate as a minimum requirement.

"As usual, Korean students are the most attentive and industrious coaches at a Pro Diploma course that I have come across," said English course instructor Richard Bates.

"They are willing to offer their views and opinions which contribute richly to the course. They are a pleasure to work with and to work for."

The coveted Pro Diploma is the highest coaching qualification awarded by the AFC.

# AZADI STADIUM

Tehran, Iran

Built as the centre-piece of the hosting of the 1974 Asian Games, Tehran's iconic Azadi Stadium is the home venue for the Iran national team as well as domestic heavyweights Persepolis and Esteghlal and is the largest football venue in the Middle East.

The bowl-shaped structure, which helps create a vibrant and often intimidating atmosphere, sits within the Azadi Sports

Complex, which also contains an aquatics centre and several other sporting venues.

Opened in 1971, the record attendance was set in September 1997 as a crowd of 120,000 attended the 1998 FIFA World Cup qualifier between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which ended in a 1-1 draw. Officially, the attendance is currently limited to 100,000.

In April 2012, the meeting between Iran's Persepolis and Qatar's Al Gharafa attracted an AFC Champions League record crowd of 96,200 – beating the previous best set at the

same venue as Persepolis entertained Uzbekistan's Bunyodkor three years earlier.

The Azadi Stadium has also hosted some of Asian football's most prestigious matches, including the final of the 1976 AFC Asian Cup, when Ali Parvin scored the only goal of the game to give hosts Iran victory over Kuwait.

And in 1999, the stadium played host to the final of the Asian Club Championship, in which Jubilo Iwata defeated Esteghlal 2-1.

Left & Right October 2001



Above April 2012




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